

Dual Identities: Being White and a Jew

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My dad was a Jew from New York. After serving as a medic in World War II, he enrolled at City College of New York. City College was proudly tuition-free. There were no religious or race quotas. Many of the students were like him, Jewish G.I.s from Brooklyn, looking to get an education. But after earning his MA in engineering, my dad took a job in Milwaukee, and suddenly his being a white male was distinctly *disadvantaged by his being a Jew*. Milwaukee was a city where a large proportion of residents were of German background. In his corporation, it became clear that there would be little chance for professional advancement for a Jew. Within a few years, he had moved to St. Louis, which had a much larger Jewish population, and where his minority status would be less likely to hold back his career. What my dad had faced was the dichotomy between being white- and the doors that were open to him because of his race-- and the reality of being a Jew- and the doors that were closed to him because of his religion. I wonder: how many of you have similar stories in your family?

It's a generation later, and still being white and being Jewish mark the way we are seen in the world. But these dual identities are also creating a conversation *within ourselves*- about how we see ourselves. I say this knowing not all Jews are white, 8% of us are black or Hispanic Jews of color, and even more are Jews from the middle east. But the reality is that most American Jews are central or eastern European Caucasians. Regardless of your particular heritage, I think this "dual identity" is a germane conversation for all of us, because for many Jews, we are conscious of the parts of our identity where there has been an inherent advantage- perhaps it is based on our gender, or race, or socio-economic success, and the parts of our identity where we have faced biases or barriers because of our minority status.

The disconnect for many of us as Jews is that our day-to-day experiences reflect the privileges of being of the white majority, yet we carry the mindset of being Jews, with the imprint of being a minority deep within us. I think most of us would **identify** with being Jewish before we would identify with being white, because being Jewish is a conscious decision to connect to a group of people, with whom we share a distinct set of values, holidays, a history and culture. Being White is not a conscious decision- it is a condition of birth- we don't share a culture in common with other whites because of our skin color, any more than we can say we have shared values with others because we have hazel eyes or blue eyes. I suspect our parent's and grandparent's generation may have felt more vividly the sense that as a Jew they were not fully embraced by society- that their fortunes in life might be impacted by their being Jewish; the job promotion given to another guy, the apartment rented to the young Protestant couple. But if in recent decades we have not been as conscious of explicit anti-Jewish bias in every-day life, that does not mean that as Jews we feel wholly embraced by a majority culture. We remain ever-conscious of being a Jew – and that impacts the way we look at the world.

In 1903, W. E. B. DuBois wrote of black Americans having two distinctly different identities, when he wrote, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others...One ever feels his two-ness." And if we as Jews don't feel this duality as strongly as a black American does, I would suggest that it is this double consciousness we feel when we walk into spaces and instinctively look to see if there are other Jews in the room, or when we are curious to know if there are other Jews in our kid's elementary schools or worry how overboard your child's teacher will go with Christmas projects and decorations this December. We are not very far away from an unspoken instinct to know who we can turn to if we need a shared outlook about how Jews are portrayed in school history books or advocacy against anti-Israel bias. It is that dual identity that translates into the insistence by many American Jews to keep their passports current, *just in case*.

Side by side with our Jewish identity is our white identity. We are coming to understand the multitude of ways that race impacts our society, and the opportunities that are present or not present, based on skin color. This has been a learning curve for many of us, a time to understand more deeply, things we have noticed, or lived with, or perhaps have given little thought to, in the past. We might even reject this notion that others' skin color impacts how we respond, or that doors have been open to us along the way because of our skin color. What we are understanding is that, in the words of author Isabel Wilkerson in her book *Caste*, racism is like an old house that we have inherited in this country, that we may not have built, but we are the one's responsible for repairing. When I talk about the prevalence of *white supremacy*, I am not talking about *white supremacists*: the neo-Nazi, alt-right racists, the ones who believe in the inherent intellectual and physical superiority of white people. Those people are 100% in agreement that *we Jews are not white*- Jews are not part of a superior people, regardless of our having white skin. When I talk about Jews as being white, I mean for us to understand the privileges and opportunities that have been built into our lives simply by virtue of being white- that is what *white supremacy is*- a society structured around the assumption of whiteness. White supremacy is the money that went to my public school in a white suburb that was more than went to an inner-city school, which was all black, because the whites had fled St. Louis city limits in the late 1960s. We don't need to feel guilty or bad about our race or be apologists for what other white people have said or done over the centuries. It is upon us to do the uncomfortable work of examining the prejudices that have shaped and disadvantaged the lives of others, then actively reject them, and work for more equity. Without guilt, and without agenda, we can talk about race and its impact on society, and how to change patterns that have discriminated as a whole against people of color.

And here we are in the national conversation about race, hearing the inner voices of our dual identities. At this same moment when we are examining the comforts that being white has provided in everyday opportunities like getting jobs or getting mortgages, we are facing more discomfort at the alarming rise in Anti-Semitism. Being Jewish is living with the reality that as a minority there are those who love us and those who do not- and that many who do not love us are also white. Anti-Semitism is a part of our identity as a Jew, just as facing racism is a part of

living as a Black person, or an Asian American, a Latinx or a Muslim American. We are seeing a backlash against the diversity that has been a part of America for the last century, and an increase in violent intolerance. 75% of Jews say there is more anti-Semitism today than just 5 years ago. In the recently released PEW Survey of “Jewish-Americans in 2020”, among that 75%, “the vast majority” of respondents felt that this was a combination of more anti-Semitism in the country and a growing number of people feeling free to express their anti-Semitic views. When I checked the ADL’s Hate Tracker, it was disheartening to see that every day in this country, property is defaced with swastikas, Orthodox Jews or their children are verbally assaulted outside schools and synagogues; neo-Nazi flyers blanket cars, and Jewish institutions receive nasty calls. Not only do more **non-whites** perceive threatening environments and hold more fears about their neighbors, but white Jews share this experience. Jews are the target of violence, not because they are white, but because they are Jewish. And regardless of what is seen in the media, the perpetrators are overwhelmingly white, and represent right wing, not left wing, extremist politics.

So how do we live with this duality? We might conclude that oy! “it is not easy to be a Jew/ *“shver tsu zayn a yid”*: it is our bad luck to be rejected by some because we are seen as white and rejected by others because we are seen as Jewish. But I believe that it is precisely because we hold dual identities that we are able to bring to this moment in time a perspective that is unique from others. We have something invaluable to add to the national reckoning on race.

What can we say to the white majority who cannot see the inherent biases that have been baked into societal fixtures like residential zoning, education, financial institutions, criminal justice, and health care distribution?

What can we say to the minorities who see whites as tone deaf, so fearful of losing any of our societal powers that we will deny their pain and their lived experiences as people of color in this country?

Here is what we as Jews can offer to white society. We Jews have been part of American society since 1654- almost 370 years. As patriots, we have helped build the civic, economic and political life of this country. There is much America has gotten right. But there is much that we have gotten wrong, apparent now to us, in hindsight. Some of the racial injustice was purposeful- we propagated an agricultural economy for centuries by enslaving and beating human beings. Some of our racial injustice was myopic, like granting the GI bill to white soldiers after WW II but excluding black GIs from this economic benefit. Some of our racial injustice was done with good intention, like passing tough drug and crime laws that we now see were misguided because they did not focus on the underlying lack of opportunities which exacerbated those problems. Here is what we Jews can say to white society. Judaism stands on a foundation of teshuvah, of changing for the better- it is the heart of our annual High Holy Days, it is in our daily prayer. Being strong is not about holding on to beliefs and behaviors at all costs. Strength is about confronting where we have fallen short and doing the work to improve.

We engage in *Chesbon haNefesh*- a self-examination and change who we are to who we should be. Change is not a game of win or lose, it is a natural part of life, what we are supposed to be doing. The ability to change is humanity's superpower.

Here is what we as Jews can offer to communities of color. We Jews lived in Egypt for 430 years- that's 63 years longer than we have lived in America, and almost exactly as long as black Africans have lived in America. We did not live in Egypt with freedom or equality. The book of Exodus teaches: "You shall not oppress a stranger for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourself been strangers in the land of Egypt." (Ex. 23:9) Torah reminds us never to let our comfort eclipse that truth that we have been the outsider. In traditional synagogues on Yom Kippur day, the story of the scapegoat is read, of the random selection by those in power of a goat upon whose head the communal sins would be placed, before it would be cast out of society (Lev. 19). Sadly, we Jews and people of color have all taken the role of scapegoat. And truth be told, we have all at times, made others scapegoats for the societal ills we do not want to take responsibility for. We wrongfully think we can blame others, and that purifies society. Here is what we Jews can offer to communities of color: we can't know what it feels like to be in your shoes. We see your anger; we hear your pain. Do not reject those whose eyes are opening and whose hearts are turning. The message of the High Holy Days is that the future can only be realized by repentance and forgiveness. Let us be at a place of new beginnings.

For Jews who are white, this may be the moment to leverage our white agency, as we feel the discomfort of growing anti-Semitism. 17% of Jews- almost one in five-- live in households with members who are people of color. That means all of us know the struggle of what it means to be part of a minority, and to hold the tension between race and religion. Let's bring that unique heart into the world around us and help create some change.

May that be *our* superpower.