



Educator's Guide

Are Jews White?

While some Ashkenazi Jews may appear white and identify as such, the concept of whiteness is complex. Historically, Jews were considered a separate and inferior race and yet, over time, antisemitism, assimilation efforts and rising socioeconomic status have influenced the perception of "Jewish whiteness." However, this categorization overlooks the experiences of Jews of Color and non-Ashkenazim and further perpetuates the ongoing antisemitism Jews face today.

Link to video: <https://unpacked.education/video/are-jews-white/>

Big Ideas

1. Jewish identity is multifaceted and cannot be distilled into a singular racial or ethnic label.
2. The shifting dynamics of "whiteness" have both excluded and included Jews, depending on societal contexts and pressures.
3. Embracing or resisting the label of "white" among Ashkenazi Jews is tied to both external perceptions and internal community struggles.

Essential Questions

1. Are Jews "white"?
2. To what extent do Ashkenazi Jews' perceptions of "whiteness" shape their communal narratives and interactions with other communities?
3. How might external labels perpetuate misunderstanding or erasure of diverse Jewish experiences and histories?

Review Questions

1. Jews come from:
 - Only eastern European countries
 - Only Israel
 - Israel and America



- All around the world
- 2.** Race is a(n) _____ construct.
- Educational
 - **Social**
 - Economic
 - Democratic
- 3.** When did the idea of “whiteness” begin?
- During World War II and the Third Reich with Hitler in power
 - In medieval Europe as non-white people started moving into European cities.
 - **When Europeans started spreading their ideals across the world through imperialism and colonization**
 - In 1783 at the end of the Revolutionary War in America
- 4.** As early as the _____, Jews were included in the legal definition of “free white persons,” eligible to become citizens in America.
- 1680s
 - **1790s**
 - 1860s
 - 1950s
- 5.** What kind of immigrants were welcomed in America in the late 1800s?
- **White-presenting, Anglo-Saxon, Christian immigrants**
 - Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants
 - Black, Christian immigrants
 - None of the above
- 6.** After World War I, antisemitism in America:
- Disappeared
 - Became better
 - Stayed the same
 - **Became worse**



7. What happened in response to the “Jewish problem,” the Great Depression, and the antisemitic rhetoric in America?
 - Many Jews doubled-down and became more outspoken about their different culture
 - **Many white-presenting Jews tried even harder to prove their belonging in society by asserting their whiteness compared to Black Americans**
 - Many Jews went back to Europe hoping to find belonging there
 - Many Jews embraced their Black American neighbors, creating mixed communities.

8. Labeling all Jews as white is detrimental because:
 - Labeling Jews as white erases the experiences and identities of Jews of color
 - Labeling Jews as white ignores the real antisemitism that is occurring today
 - Labeling Jews as white is helpful in creating a unified experience for all Jews
 - **A and B**

Discussion Questions

1. Diverse Jewish identity:

Given that Jews come from diverse regions like India, Morocco, Brazil, and the Philippines, how might the experiences of Jews from different regions intersect with or differ from each other, especially in relation to race and cultural identity? How does this diversity challenge or support the notion of “whiteness”?

2. Is affirmative action a Jewish value?

Watch the following video on “[Is affirmative action a Jewish value?](#)”. Explore the concept of Jewish diversity in relation to affirmative action with your students. How might the impact of affirmative action policies differ for different segments of the Jewish community, such as Jews of color versus white-presenting Jews? Share your thoughts on how these policies could affect Jewish individuals and communities in unique ways.

3. The relationship between Jewish and Black Americans:



Have the students watch this video on [Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Jewish connection](#).

- Discuss some of the dynamics between Jews and Black Americans seen in the film. How does this contribute to the complexity of our understanding of racial relations in America?
- Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel walked with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1965 Selma to Montgomery March for voting rights. How could this show of unity impact the world's perception of Jews? How does this contribute to our own self-perception?
- According to recent [FBI data](#) both Black Americans and Jewish Americans suffer from hate crimes. Do you think this data could be helpful in creating common ground between these two groups? Explain your answer.

4. The complexity of antisemitism in America:

In the aftermath of WWII, many Jews seemed to blend into mainstream American culture and achieve significant economic and social advancements. Yet, recent [FBI statistics](#) show that Jews are the religious group most targeted by hate crimes in recent years.

- How might shifting away from the "white" designation influence the Jewish community's perspective on current racial discussions in America?
- In what ways does the rise of white supremacy play a role in the growing number of antisemitic hate crimes?
- How do increasing antisemitic incidents influence the debate about whether Jews are considered "white"?

5. Jews and privilege:

While Jews have grappled with antisemitism, challenging the idea of them being neatly labeled as "white", it's also argued that many Jews who present as white can access certain privileges not extended to people of color. These privileges might include blending seamlessly into society or benefiting from programs like the G.I. Bill, which paved the way for many into the middle class - opportunities often restricted for people of color.

- Do you believe that Jews experience what is referred to as "white privilege"?
- Does this privilege, if present, automatically classify Jews as "white"?
- How does this dialogue influence the broader conversation surrounding Jewish identity, whiteness, and race?



Learning Activities

1. **Lesson plan:** Use our ready made lesson plan on “Are Jews White?” [HERE](#).

2. **Research antisemitic American comics:**

Divide the students into small groups (no more than 4 to a group). Have them research antisemitic American comics (some examples are [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). Each group must choose one image, write down the answers to the questions below, and then present to the class.

- i. Explain what is happening in the image.
- ii. What year was the comic printed?
- iii. What newspaper or magazine was it printed in?
- iv. What is the underlying message of the image? In other words, what is the artist trying to convey?
- v. How do the Jews look in the image? Do they have big noses? Do they look white? Do they wear Jewish garb?
- vi. How are the non-Jews portrayed in the image?

Following presentations, debrief with the students:

- What surprised you about the comics?
- What do these comics tell you about how Jews are portrayed by others?
- How might these antisemitic comics impact whether or not Jews should be considered “white”? Explain your answer.

3. **Research and Activism:**

In small groups, ask your students to research one of the following organizations that supports Jews of Color:

- [Be’chol Lashon](#)
- [Ayecha Resource Organization](#)
- [Jews in All Hues](#)
- [Jews of Color Initiative](#)
- [Joyous Justice](#)

Students should research why the group exists, what its primary goals are and what activities or programs it facilitates for group members. After completing the research process, the students should develop and present a campaign for their fellow students to raise awareness of the



organization they researched and how they can get involved.

- 4. Kahoot:** Play our Kahoot about “Are Jews White?” [here!](#)

Reflection Questions

1. Racial identification - how do I see myself?

If you were asked to identify yourself by race, what would you answer?

- How do you find yourself identifying on official forms (medical forms, school forms, camp forms)?
- Have you ever felt conflicted in giving this answer? Do you ever want to answer more than one thing?
- Imagine you are living in post-WWII America where passing as white is becoming more common. Would you try passing as white in order to get ahead? Why or why not? Would you maintain your own Jewish identity? What, if any, elements that identify you as Jewish would you be willing to give up to pass as white?
- Has learning about the history of antisemitism in America contributed to your growing Jewish identity? Why or why not?

2. Racial identification - how do others see me?

Race is something that is often used by people in order to promote their own ideologies, leading to oppression of anyone who is not part of what is viewed as the “superior race”.

- How would you respond to someone who used race as a way of justifying oppressive behavior?
- Have you ever experienced racism personally? Have you ever witnessed it with someone else? How did you respond?

3. Jews come in all shapes and colors

Classifying Jews strictly as “white” poses challenges. This approach can sideline the experiences of Jews who don’t fit the white mold, and overlook the increasing antisemitism emerging from white supremacist circles. It’s essential to recognize that Jews encompass a vast range of identities and backgrounds. More often than not, others perceive Jews not by color distinctions, but solely for their Jewish heritage.

Reflect on the words of Daniel Pearl, a non-religious Jewish journalist who, before being murdered by terrorists, proclaimed, “My father is Jewish, my mother is Jewish, I am Jewish.” To these extremists, Daniel wasn’t seen through the lens of race but was identified distinctly by his Jewish heritage.



- a. Does this perspective align with how you perceive your Jewish identity?
- b. Do you feel that it is important to identify as a Jew first?
- c. How could prioritizing one's Jewish identity help address the challenges surrounding the topics of whiteness and white supremacy?

Further Learning

1. Unpacked for Educators:
 - [The Israeli Black Panthers](#)
 - [The Story of Israel's Black Panthers](#) (podcast)
 - [Who are the Israelis?](#)
 - [How Mizrahi Music took over Israeli Pop](#)
 - [Ethiopian Jewry](#)
 - [Immigration Nation](#)
 - [The History of Black Jews in America](#)
 - [Ingathering of Exiles: From Ethiopia to Israel](#) (podcast)
 - [Is affirmative action a Jewish value?](#) (article and video)
2. Emma Green, "[Are Jews White?](#)", The Atlantic. *This article discusses the various sides of the debate - are Jews white?*
3. [The Racial Identity of U.S. Jews - A case study](#), Harvard Divinity School. *This article discusses the different ways Jews historically identified themselves, and includes activities and discussion questions on the question of "are Jews white?"*
4. Matti Friedman, "[Nobody hijacked Israel. It's just not what its pioneers thought they'd created](#)", Times of Israel. *This article discusses how Israel navigates the distance between the vision of Israel's Ashkenazi European founders, and its current, multicultural and heavily Mizrahi society.*