



## **Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic** **An Approach to the Jewish Community for Christian Seminarians**

### **Script 25: Are Jews White?**

**Are Jews white?** This question has both social and racial dimensions. Let's consider the social dimensions first. For much of their history, and in many parts of the world, Jews have not been considered "white" in the societies in which they lived. Then, as now, the label "white" is misappropriated and exploited as a descriptor to denote a certain social status that grants a person acceptance and a higher social standing within the majority culture of a society. Most Jews who look white are profoundly uncomfortable with this biased social hierarchy and reject the label "white" accordingly.

In America today, the question "Are Jews white?" has resurfaced in disturbing and often dangerous ways. While Jews typically see themselves as a minority, extremists on the far left often see Jews as part of a white establishment that oppresses people of color. This social categorization is misinformed and a leading factor in the rise of antisemitism in the far-left political and social circles.

The racial aspects of the "Are Jews white?" question arise most often in contemporary America among extremists on the far right. They see Jews as a "faux-white" race that is contaminating the white-majority society. This view echoes classic anti-Jewish tropes and is a leading factor in the rise of antisemitism in far-right political and social circles.<sup>1</sup>

Let's dig a little deeper into the question of Jews as a race. More often than not, this race categorization has defined Jews as a race unto themselves, and not as white. The example of Hitler and the Holocaust is only the most glaring in recent memory of using inaccurate racial stereotyping to persecute Jews. Hitler labeled Jews as physically impure, not of the blonde, blue-eyed "genetically pure" Aryan race. Nazi Germany defined one as a Jew who had three full-Jewish grandparents, whatever they meant by full-Jewish.

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<sup>1</sup> For further information, please watch the "Antisemitism 101: An Introduction" and "Antisemitism 201: Myths and Modern Times" videos in the "Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic" series.

However, racially stereotyping Jews goes back to at least to 1000 CE.<sup>2</sup> The long, hooked-nose trope appeared in medieval paintings and in Shakespeare's Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. Scholars discuss and debate whether or not racially-motivated persecution of Jews goes back much further, including persecution by Hellenistic and Roman Empires.

Let's be clear. **Being Jewish is not being white.** Being Jewish is complicated, wondrous, and a way of living a life filled with purpose and meaning. Many Jews are born Jewish based on lineage, based on the identity of their mother--the traditional definition of a "born Jew" --or their father --"patrilineal descent," accepted in the Reform Jewish movement. Many others choose to become Jewish through a formal process of conversion. Among "born Jews" and "Jews by Choice," there are white Jews, black Jews, brown Jews, and many others.

One method to categorize those who were born Jewish is by geographic origin. Three broad classifications distinguish Jews by their geographic roots:

**Ashkenazi:** The word derives from *Ashkenaz*, the traditional Hebrew name of Germany. *Ashkenazi* (or *Ashkenazic*) Jews trace their ancestry to Jews who began living in Germany between the fifth and thirteenth centuries. From there, Jews migrated throughout Central, Western, and Eastern Europe, Russia, North America, and Israel.

**Sephardi:** The word comes from *Sepharad*, the Hebrew term for Spain. *Sephardi* (or *Sephardic*) Jews trace their roots back to the proud and noble Jewish communities of Spain, where they flourished from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries in a period often called the Golden Age. Following the Spanish expulsion in 1492 and the horrors of the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions, *Sephardi* Jews migrated to the Ottoman Empire, the Netherlands, Greece, North Africa, Israel, and North America.

**Mizrachi:** The word is derived from the Hebrew *mizrach*, meaning "east." Jews who come from the so-called *Eydot Ha-Mizrach*--"Communities of the East"--are descendants of ancient Jewish communities that existed in the Middle East and North Africa since biblical days. They include a variety of Jewish subcommunities—Iraqi, Persian, Syrian, Yemenite, Bukharan, Jews from Kurdistan and Georgia, and the mountain Jews of Azerbaijan and Dagestan.

Today, most *Mizrachi* Jews live in Israel. There the majority of Jews are *Sephardi*, while *Ashkenazi* Jews form the second largest classification of the Israeli Jewish population. In North America and Europe, most Jews are *Ashkenazi*, with substantial *Sephardi* Jewish communities in major American and European cities. Marriages between *Ashkenazi*, *Sephardi*, and *Mizrachi* Jews in Israel and elsewhere have eroded many of the traditional distinctions between these groups and makes it difficult for demographers to accurately identify and define them in the twenty-first century.

This brings us back to our central question. Are Jews white and best classified as part of the white race? **The unequivocal answer is NO.** The large worldwide population of Sephardi Jews and Mizrachi Jews is one way to debunk this stereotype. Another is the large number of black, brown, and Asian Jews, many of whom are born Jewish and others who have converted to Judaism. All are vital and integral members of the Jewish people. To cite one example of this

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<sup>2</sup> CE: Common Era, nomenclature used by Jews and many Christians instead of AD.

Jewish diversity, a 2021 demographic study of the Los Angeles Jewish community identified 32,500 Jewish persons of color—6% of all Jewish people in Los Angeles.

Are Jews white people? Raising the question brings out another Jewish stereotype, that a Jew is a white person of European descent. Yet, as previously stated, not all Jews are white. So, how do Jews identify themselves? Certainly not as a race. As a religion? Judaism is unquestionably a religion, but there are many Jews who proudly call themselves Jews but observe few if any religious tenets of Judaism. Are Jews an ethnicity?

A generation ago, many Ashkenazi Jewish Americans lived in the same neighborhoods and identified most strongly with the cultural elements of their tradition:

- The food they ate--the people of the lox and bagels;
- The inside jokes they shared, humor that only Jews could understand;
- The Yiddish language they shared, even for Jews who only knew a few Yiddish words and phrases; and
- A shared sense of Jewish culture.

However, with large numbers of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews in America, with many others who have converted to Judaism, and many Jews in interfaith families, using Ashkenazi Jewish ethnicity as the identifier for being Jewish leaves these people who are fully Jewish on the outside looking in. As a means of Jewish identity, it just doesn't work anymore.

The truth is defining Jewish identity is a challenging and shifting endeavor for Jews. The one absolute truism is that identifying with the Jewish people is not a matter of race, white or otherwise.

Jewish identity can be looked at as a combination of religion, ethnicity, and civilization. Jews are a people. They possess unique characteristics of language, literature, arts, religion, and laws. They are a religious people. Even those Jews who are not adherents to Jewish ritual observance resonate with some aspect of Jewish religious life. It might be the Passover Seder, some form of the Hanukah celebration, B'nai Mitzvah<sup>3</sup> for their children, or even occasionally engaging in the rituals of the weekly Sabbath.

For other Jews, their identity is centered on the Jewish values passed down from generation to generation over more than 3,000 years of Jewish history. Values of justice, of not oppressing the stranger, and even loving the stranger. Jewish values of seeing everyone as being created in the image of God. These values are found in the Torah and continue to be written and rewritten to this very day.

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<sup>3</sup> B'nai Mitzvah is the plural of "coming of age" ceremonies for Jewish young people, often called Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah.

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