



Jewish rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel presenting Martin Luther King Jr. with the Judaism and World Peace award in 1965. Library of Congress: <http://bit.ly/2EkEvCT>

Note on this Case Study:

Religions are embedded in culture, and are deeply impacted by questions of power. While reading this case study about Judaism and life as a member of a minority religion in America, think about who is in power and who lacks power. Is someone being oppressed? Is someone acting as an oppressor? How might religious people respond differently when they are in a position of authority or in a position of oppression?

As always, when thinking about religion and power, focus on how religion is internally diverse, always evolving and changing, and always embedded in specific cultures.

The Religious Literacy Project is directed by Diane L. Moore and all content is constructed under her editorial direction.

The Racial Identity of US Jews

For many Jews, America has been a land of both opportunity and persecution. On average, Jews are better educated and more wealthy than other Americans, and there are more Jewish members of Congress than their share of the population. However, FBI reports show that Jews have been attacked in hate crimes more than any other US religious group.¹ This ambiguity is reflected in Jewish racial identity. Race is a social construct—it is a powerful idea created by humans, not biological fact—and the boundaries of race are thus often flexible.² As of 2013, 94% of US Jews identified as white.³ However, Jewish racial identity has changed many times in US history.

In 19th century America, Jews were generally believed to be a distinct race within a broad category of white people. Jews who wanted to maintain their distinct traditions self-described as both racially Jewish and white. This was a common way of viewing race at the time; immigrant groups like the Germans, the Irish, and Jews were seen as distinct races, but they could still all be seen as white. Some of these groups—like the Irish—were sometimes grouped with African Americans and struggled to gain inclusion into white society, but 19th century Jews were largely considered to be just another sub-group in the US’s majority white population.⁴

In the early 20th century, as the US industrialized, immigration increased, and Nazism spread from

Europe, many Americans became nativist and tried to exclude newer immigrants—who were often poorer than those of the 19th century—from being considered white. Jews began to be called non-white, and many even started calling Jews black. For example, in 1910, professor Arthur Abernathy published a book called *The Jew a Negro*, claiming Jews and Africans were racially identical. His book compared racist stereotypes of black physical and social traits to stereotypical Jewish traits to show that Jews were black. Similar ideas led some colleges, like Harvard and NYU, to set up racial quotas to exclude Jews from “white man’s college[s].” In the

¹ Emma Green, “Are Jews White?” *The Atlantic*, Dec. 5, 2016. <http://theatlantic.com/2gZgrdA>; Pew Research Center, “A Portrait of Jewish Americans,” *Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life*, Oct. 1, 2013. <http://pewrsr.ch/1lzFktu>.

² Nell Irvin Painter, *A History of White People*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), ix.

³ Pew Research Center, “A Portrait of Jewish Americans.”

⁴ Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 16-19, 31.

South, Jim Crow laws began to target Jews as well as black Americans; in Pine Bluff, Arkansas in 1912, a Jewish immigrant was nearly lynched after onlookers took him for a black man walking with a white woman. From 1913-15, these issues gained national attention in the trial of Leo Frank, a Jewish man accused of raping and murdering a white girl in Atlanta. White Georgians compared Frank's Jewish racial identity to racist stereotypes of African Americans, and the jury convicted Frank. His sentence was commuted by Georgia's governor, but a few days later, a white mob lynched Frank. Anti-Semitic propaganda also spread during these years, supported by popular figures like automaker Henry Ford and Catholic radio priest Father Coughlin.⁵

By the 1930s anti-Jewish racism was at an all-time high, but Jewish American racial identity quickly shifted again. Partially, this was because Jews were an important part of president Franklin D. Roosevelt's political coalition. As such, he discouraged questioning Jewish racial identity as anything but white, and fought hard against nativists and anti-Semitism, declaring that all immigrants were "full Americans." When the US entered WWII against Germany, many Americans stopped identifying Jews as a separate race in opposition to the genocidal racial ideas of Nazis. Most importantly, when the US military racially segregated WWII army units, they placed Jews in white units, thus affirming Jews' status as whites. By the time the veterans came home, Jews were generally considered white again; then they advanced economically and took part in the 1950s exodus of white Americans from inner cities to the suburbs.⁶

20th century Jews navigated the changes to their racial identity in diverse ways. Many resisted being called white because they identified with the struggles of black Americans, seeing their own history of persecution in the discrimination faced by African Americans. These Jews benefitted from their privilege as white Americans, but maintained a desire for a distinct racial identity from the white people they saw as oppressive. However, other Jews, particularly those in the South who might suffer violence if they supported their black neighbors, were far more comfortable affirming their status as white, and some even worked to maintain white supremacy. Regardless, Jews often struggled to reconcile the benefits of being white in the US with their desire to maintain a distinct Jewish racial identity rooted in a history of persecution.⁷

In the 21st century, while most Americans believe Jews are white, racial issues linger. For example, in 2017, after the superhero movie *Wonder Woman* was criticized for lacking racial diversity, some critics countered that the main character, played by Jewish actress Gal Gadot, is a person of color.⁸ This caused major debate in US Jewish media, with many Jewish journalists claiming that Gadot is white and others that she is a person of color.⁹ Racial hate crimes against Jews also remain common. In August 2017, white supremacists descended on Charlottesville, Virginia where they held two days of racist rallies, and attacked bystanders, killing one and injuring 19 others. During these events, the white supremacists chanted anti-Semitic slogans, falsely claimed Jewish people had tricked people into believing they are white, and blamed Jews for all racial problems in the US. Some of the groups' leaders even criticized president Donald Trump—who was otherwise often praised by them—because his daughter had converted to Judaism.¹⁰ While admittedly a small piece of US Jewish history, Jews' complex racial identity illustrates their status as both a privileged and persecuted minority in America.

⁵ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, 43-44, 53, 122-127.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 189-194, 200-201.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 58, 147-156, 198-201.

⁸ Matthew Mueller, "Wonder Woman: There IS a Person of Color in the Lead Role," *ComicBook*, June 1, 2017. <http://bit.ly/2CgeoLS>

⁹ Noah Berlatsky, "Why Do White People Get Mad When We Call Wonder Woman White?" *Forward*, June 7, 2017. <http://bit.ly/2ECb5Un>

¹⁰ Jessica Weis, "Why Do White Supremacists Hate (white) Jews so Much?" *Univision News*, Aug. 16, 2017. <http://bit.ly/2EB4M3l>

Additional Resources

Primary Sources:

- Political cartoon, “The Modern Moses” from Puck (1881): <http://bit.ly/2DG02Xf>
- Political cartoon, “Their New Jerusalem” from Judge (1892): <http://bit.ly/2DiKqvO>
- Blog from ComicBook arguing Gal Gadot is not white (2017): <http://bit.ly/2CgeoSLS>
- Three debating articles from the Jewish weekly newspaper The Forward about the racial identity of Gal Gadot’s Wonder Woman (2017): <http://bit.ly/2BnzdyF> ; <http://bit.ly/2H58TD4> ; <http://bit.ly/2ECb5Un>

Secondary Sources:

- Article from The Atlantic: “Are Jews White?” (2016): <http://theatlantic.com/2gZgrdA>
- Princeton professor Nell Irvin Painter on the expanding definition of whiteness including the incorporation of Jews (2012): <http://bit.ly/2FNBxYI>
- PBS video on black Jews in the 21st century US (2007): <http://to.pbs.org/2EuOZA1>
- WP Article on why white supremacists hate Jews (2017): <http://wapo.st/2nXHUBI>
- Univision on why white supremacists hate Jews (2017): <http://bit.ly/2EB4M3I>
- The Jewish Women’s Archive on the racial identity of US Jews and their relationship to the Civil Rights Movement: <http://bit.ly/2sy7a6e>

Discussion Questions

- What does “race is a social construct” mean? How does the changing racial identity of Jews in American history demonstrate this statement?
- How does the cultural context of Jews impact the ways in which they consider questions of race in the US? Why might Jews in different parts of the country have different ideas about race?
- Identify an instance of structural violence in this case study. What is the cultural violence that makes this structural violence seem acceptable?
- Read the three articles about *Wonder Woman* actress Gal Gadot from The Forward. What is at stake for these Jewish authors? Why do they seem to disagree about Gadot’s racial identity?
- How has the ambiguous racial identity of Jews benefited their lives in the US? How has it made it more challenging or even dangerous?
- Look at the two political cartoons in the primary sources and read their descriptions. What changed in these depictions of Jewish immigrants over this 11 year period? What stayed the same?



Jewish and Israeli actress Gal Gadot in the US in 2014 promoting *Wonder Woman*. Photo by Gage Skidmore. Wikimedia Commons: <http://bit.ly/2EveuRB>