

Once upon a time there lived a little girl with curly brown hair, and dark brown eyes. She grew up in a neighborhood with loving parents, and lots of neighbors who looked and thought like her. As she got older, she attended school with lots of people who thought like her, even if they did not all look like her. She celebrated her bat mitzvah, and later was confirmed. When it was time to go away to college, she wanted something different. She wanted to know more about the other people who she saw on television, in the movies, on the internet. She knew some of them lived nearby but she rarely, if ever, interacted with them. College would be the time to do that. So she went away to college, and she became involved in a number of organizations. Some of those groups required her to check her Judaism at the door, and choosing the values that were instilled in her throughout her childhood she chose them over being publically Jewish. When she returned home over winter break and spoke about what she had been learning, what she was involved in, she was pushed away. Her old friends did not like what she was interested in, her parents were worried, her neighbors deeply concerned. The young woman with curly brown hair and dark brown eyes went back to college and continued her work towards what she saw as a better world, because of what she had been brought up to believe in, even though it meant keeping her religious identity hidden from those around her.

Welcome to America.

A fictitious story but one that many in our country would identify with, though many would want the race or ethnicity mentioned. Others would want her to be a he. Still others would say that the character needs blond hair, blue eyes. But the essence of the story would remain the same.

Many of us are brought up in bubbles of our or our family's making. In many ways, there is nothing wrong with a bubble. Protection is something we can all understand. But when we allow our children, our neighbors, our friends to go out into the world without preparation that there are people who think differently, eat different foods, look different, *are* different than us - we are setting one another up for disaster.

The current state of our country is an example of this. The Right and the Left are at one another's throats. The religious freedom of our Constitution is threatened regularly, the belief that "all men are created equal" supported by further Amendments, is threatened. And we, Jewish Americans and our families are stuck in the middle. Being pulled Left and Right, Right and Left. Being told that we are disloyal, that we are white colonists committing genocide against the Palestinians, that we rule the world, that we ruin the world with our existence.

How did we get here, again? How are we preparing to mourn the anniversary of the Tree of Life shooting so soon? How is it that we must spend so much time protecting ourselves from harm, that we have no energy left to protect others?

In his book (*Semitism*), Jonathan Weisman explores first our history as Americans and then discusses the very real reality of Anti-Semitism. The role of white supremacy, the role of the alt-right, of Twitter trolls, of 4chan and 8chan - the very real fear of a segment of white America of the big bad Jew.

For, even if we do not engage in social media, social media is shaping our reality. When facts no longer matter, when one's opinion is irrefutable, when it is more important to be heard - America falls. Jonathan Weisman's book is a call to American Jews that we need to wake up, we need to speak up, we cannot let others do the talking for us. That as we have quietly continued our lives, other people have given *us* a new narrative. A narrative that says Jews are all white, that therefore we all benefit from white privilege, that our care for the State of Israel makes us colonists, that Anti-Semitism is made up, because other groups have it worse.

Welcome to America.

Yes, most of us are white or white passing in the eyes of society. But many of us are not white, many of us are not of European descent. Many of us have faced Anti-Semitism during our lives, and many of us continue to be impacted by it. We have experienced it in any number of ways:  
not picked for the team,  
not granted the promotion,  
not invited to the dinner  
- whatever it may be.

Are white passing Jewish Americans terrified that the police will gun them down for no reason? No. Black Jewish Americans are though, Jews of Sephardic and Mizrahi ancestry are. Much of American Jewry is white passing but once the "Jewish" part comes out, plenty of people are no longer interested in us. People are afraid of that which they know nothing about, that which they have not experienced.

In an *Atlantic* article titled “Are Jews White?” journalist Emma Green wrote:

[N]o matter how much prestige Jews may amass, their status is always ambiguous.

“White” is not a skin color, but a category marking power. American Jews do have power, but they are also often viewed with suspicion; and having power is no assurance of protection. According to the FBI’s hate-crime statistics, a majority of religiously motivated hate-crime offenses are committed against Jews each year.<sup>1</sup>

According to the FBI we are a community that suffers the majority of religiously motivated hate-crime offenses. We are also a community that makes up only 2% of the United States’ population but more than 6 percent of the new Congress is Jewish, with 34 Jews among the total of 535 lawmakers in the US House of Representatives and Senate. We are active in entertainment, banking, law, medicine, academia - the list goes on. But we also hire extra security, all over the country, to protect us during our most holy of days. We hire security because we know that large groups of Jews gathered together are a target.

Eric Ward, who is a Black history and Anti-Semitism scholar, in an interview with Tikkun magazine when asked about the current state of affairs said the following about the history of Jews in the United States:

Insisting Jews identify as white and therefore “privileged” no longer allowed a space for a conversation about anti-Semitism. The political Right was the only place to identify manifestations of anti-Semitism. How could a supposed “white ethnic” group’s suffering compare to what was happening to communities of color or women? Jews were forced to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/are-jews-white/509453/>

suppress their own history and experiences within anti-racist circles. As a result, our society found itself defenseless as white nationalists intentionally used anti-Semitism to form its worldview, develop leadership and fuel its growing social and political power.<sup>2</sup>

And it is not only hate crimes, it is also statements by public officials. Earlier this month the president of the Passaic chapter of the NAACP in New Jersey was fired from his job at the New Jersey Labor Department after some of his comments against Jews, Latinx and whites were exposed by the New Jersey Globe newspaper.<sup>3</sup> I considered quoting him but I do not want to curse in temple. Though the comments were unsurprising, it is especially disappointing considering that many Jewish Americans are active in the NAACP and one, Henry Moscowitz was one of the co-founders in 1909.<sup>4</sup> The history of Jews in America has been one that has included fighting for the rights of minorities, of immigrants, of the disenfranchised.

Though we must also remember that our history can never excuse current biases, it is important to know our history. We can hold the truths that many Jews were active in the Civil Rights movement, while others preferred to not get involved because of their concerns with Anti-Semitism. And yes, there were also Jewish slave holders in the United States along with many who fought against slavery and its aftermath - Jim Crow laws.

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<sup>2</sup> Eric K. Ward is currently the executive director of Western States Center. Western States Center's mission is to connect and build the power of community organizations to challenge and transform individuals, organizations and systems to achieve racial, gender and economic justice. <https://www.tikkun.org/the-evolution-of-identity-politics-an-interview-with-eric-ward>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/president-of-naacp-chapter-blames-jewish-media-for-portraying-him-as-anti-semitic>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.naacp.org/nations-premier-civil-rights-organization/>

One of the more interesting stories about the role of Jewish philanthropists and the African-American community, is the life of Julius Rosenwald.

From 1910 to 1940, more than 2,000 primary and secondary schools and twenty black colleges (including Howard, Dillard and Fisk universities) were established in whole or in part by contributions from him. At the height of the so-called "Rosenwald schools," nearly forty percent of southern blacks were educated at one of these institutions.<sup>5</sup>

American Jews from colonial times, through to today, have impacted every sector of America - just as every other group of Americans have. From the labor movement, to the Supreme Court, to academia to entertainment, American Jews have had an impact.

Yet, we do suffer from Anti-Semitism. And we too are not bias free - we too hold racist views. Which is a difficult thing for me to say but my experience shows that even though we preach acceptance and tolerance, we too are gatekeepers. We have much to learn from our history, a history that started in what we now call the Middle East.

Welcome to America.

Jews did not become white overnight. Nor are we seen as white by everyone, rather it is only by those who see the power we hold as something desired. White nationalists, white supremacists do not view Jews as white. Jews get blamed by white supremacists for what we consider social justice work (anti-racist, reproductive rights, labor rights and more) being a cover to enslave the

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<sup>5</sup> <https://rac.org/jews-and-civil-rights-movement>

white man to restrictions based on these values. Eric Ward, in the same interview, said the following:

Instead of recognizing this threat, many anti-racists, leftists and progressives insisted Jews primarily recognize themselves as whites with privileges. Yet the truth is that Jews are not “whites” in the United States. If they were, they would not receive death threats, their houses of worship would not be targeted, their burial sites would not be desecrated. Systemic anti-Semitic violence and threats are forms of social control and they exist to ensure that Jews know their place.

With the Jewish community, any semblance of temporal privilege is contingent on the basis that Jews suppress their primary identity as Jews, except in those ways found acceptable by larger society. And when Jews choose to self-actualize their own identities the threat is always delivered that if the Jewish community doesn't behave itself, access, safety and opportunity will be taken away. Sorry, but this doesn't happen because Jews are seen as primarily “white” but because they are seen as something other than white.

White communities simply don't receive threats like this, they don't need to.<sup>6</sup>

Ward explains clearly and succinctly that while many Jews in America benefit from white privilege, it is not a given and that it can be taken away at any moment. Because we remember our history, both in this country and before this country was established, we know that our status in a society can be taken away from us at any moment. One wrong step and we are no longer leaders, we are nothing more than vermin. We must remember our history, we must continue to work hard to build bridges of understanding with our neighbors, and we must continue to live

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<sup>6</sup> Ward <https://www.tikkun.org/the-evolution-of-identity-politics-an-interview-with-eric-ward>

our values. We are the most successful minority in American history, and we suffer from Anti-Semitism.

One of the most infamous instances of American Anti-Semitism is General Ulysses S. Grant's 1862 General Order Number 11, which banned "Jews, as a class" from the Department of Tennessee. It would be the Jewish community of Paducah, Kentucky who would go to Washington D.C. and speak with President Lincoln, who would revoke General Order Number 11.<sup>7</sup> Our American Jewish ancestors struggled with finding a place in America because both Jews and non-Jews alike struggled to categorize Jews in a nation dominated by Protestant religion and a rigid racial binary.

Let us turn back to our successes, for we are successful. Yet, we find ourselves, our community, being pulled Left and Right as non-Jews tell us what is and is not Anti-Semitism.

Kenneth Stern, director of the Bard Center for the Study of Hate, a program of the Human Rights Project at Bard College, explained during a webinar<sup>8</sup> for rabbis that there are three types of Anti-Semitism

1. Religious base - Jews reject Jesus
2. Blood Libel / Conspiracy Theories / Darwin / Nazis were the epitome of this thinking  
(Henry Ford)
3. Political Aspect (dealing with Israel)

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed account see Jonathan Sarna's book, *When General Grant Expelled the Jews*.

<sup>8</sup> Webinar was recorded and is available for CCAR members through the CCAR members page.



This third point is explained through the idea that the world would be better off without Jews because they both ruin everything and run everything. The fact that there is a Jewish State bothers people who hold these views because of its very existence. Therefore, they argue that the world would be better without Israel.

All three types of Anti-Semitism are Anti-Semitism. Some are easier to spot than others, and some have not been taught to enough Jews who may encounter them. I mention this because whenever someone calls out an Anti-Semitic dog whistle, or slogan, or picture, there is at least one well placed Jew who will say it is not Anti-Semitism. Just as there are the Neturei Karta and Satmar sects of ultra-religious Jews who believe the modern State of Israel should not exist. The Jewish people are a people like any other, we believe a wide variety of things, and hold some things to be more important than others. None of these things means we are not all part of the Jewish People, but the ability by the larger society to say “see, this Jew is on our side” is becoming more and more dangerous for our community. Because we are becoming more and more divided among ourselves, and just like the rest of the country, this is making us further isolated.

If I do not agree with Tom, then I stop listening to Tom. I block Tom, I ignore Tom - or worse I make up stories about Tom. I tell others that they should block him, that he does not represent who I am. That he is too young or too old, too liberal or too conservative - that he is not American. There is a history of this in our collective memory. Jews have long been seen as Jews, not as citizens of their respective countries or kings. It was not until Napoleon, in the late eighteenth century, that Jews are granted citizenship. One of the longest standing Anti-Semitic

tropes is that Jews are more loyal to other Jews than they are to the country they live in. All of these things are divisive, as the Reform Movement wrote in their public statement at the beginning of the month of Elul.<sup>9</sup> We owe ourselves, our communities, and our country more than that. We must do better.

Many of us are very outspoken about our opinions, and I am very grateful for this community who is willing to listen and dialogue. I want us to always be able to debate with compassion. Just because we see something differently, does not mean that we are not both welcome at the table. Our voices all need to be at the table if we are to make a positive difference in the world. Some in our community do not feel that their opinion is worthy, that they will lose their place if they speak their truths. I find this heartbreaking, and I hope you do too. I hope we can all be Americans and recognize that it is about participating in the process of building a country that calls to all of us. Whether Right or Left. Whatever our gender, sexuality or race is. We are all part of this amazing experiment in democracy. An experiment that needs all of us to speak up, to act out, to hold ourselves, our neighbors, our elected officials to a higher standard.

Welcome to America.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://urj.org/blog/2019/09/03/reform-jewish-movement-leadership-statement-we-must-all-expect-more-president-united>