

# Jews in America struggled for decades to become white. Now we must give up whiteness to fight racism.

**Let's teach our children that we are, in fact, not white, but simply Jewish.**

By Gil Steinlauf

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*Adapted from a Rosh Hashanah sermon delivered at Adas Israel Congregation.*

This summer, I had a conversation with a young woman about her Jewish identity. She told me how she grew up in a family that was very involved in her synagogue. She went to Jewish day school. She had been to Israel multiple times. But she felt very far from her Jewishness. She simply couldn't find the relevance of Judaism as she was making her way on her own in the world. I asked her what she did feel passionate about. She told me she has been reading and thinking a lot about racial justice. What moved her was the [#BlackLivesMatter](#) movement — how, in light of [Ferguson](#), [Charleston](#) and seemingly endless incidents of injustice against black people in our society, she felt a need to grapple with the racism that is so pervasive in this country and how it affects her identity.

“As a white woman,” she said, “as the product of so much white privilege, it makes me all the more angry to see how other white people so blindly and carelessly feed into the racial climate of our society.” “So the fact that you are white makes this issue all the more painful, all the more personal for you?” I asked. “Yes,” she said.

I certainly identified with her angst. I find the reality of American racism unbearable: the legacy of slavery; the institutional discrimination that is so pervasive; the scourge of mass incarceration of black Americans, with its collateral damage on families; the ongoing blight of housing segregation; the role of law enforcement in furthering racist systems and hierarchies; all this, and so much more. My answer to her, and my answer for all American Jews during these Days of Awe, is that finding our true Jewish identity can begin by questioning our whiteness.

In a flawed and racist society, we Jewish Americans are prospering, reaching the top echelons of privilege and power. With racism and injustice entrenched year after year, generation after generation, we must now ask ourselves: What role do we play in that injustice now that most of us live as white people in America? We must cease to consider ourselves to be part of the social construct of whiteness, despite all the white privilege that America affords us, privilege that eluded many of our parents and grandparents. Starting in this new year of 5776, we must teach our children that we are, in fact, not white, but simply Jewish.

The great blessing and promise of America to our ancestors was that it was a land of opportunity, where we are all recognized as equal, where nothing, not even the heavens, is beyond our reach. We all know that the saga of Jews in America is a stunning success story. Our success here is built on the efforts of the first generations of American Jews who struggled mightily to assimilate — to slough off the ways of the old country, to out-American the Americans. In many ways, today it's difficult for us to appreciate how remarkable this success is.

Well into the 20th century, we Jews were barred from the whitest country clubs. We couldn't buy houses in the whitest neighborhoods. Even today, some of us remember being called anti-Semitic names, having pennies thrown at us or being beaten up because we are Jewish. But that young woman I spoke with this summer, and most of her young adult Jewish peers today, can hardly fathom being singled out, being treated as “other,” because of their

Jewishness. And the main reason why anti-Semitism is no longer mainstream in our society is because sometime in the last half century, we convinced America that we, too, are white.

All those years of singular focus on making it in America paid off! Our achievements in business, in medicine, in the arts, in government, in all circles of American life have resulted in success and security rarely known to our wandering ancestors. The history of my own synagogue in D.C., [Adas Israel Congregation](#), mirrors the history of Jews in our country. Over a century ago, its founders dreamed of one day building what they referred to as a “great Cathedral synagogue” standing tall and proud in our nation’s capital, as powerful as the great American monuments of this city. By this spring, the [president of the United States was visiting their congregation](#) to give a speech and visit with preschool kids.

These days, the country clubs and exclusive neighborhoods are as Jewish as they are WASPy. Indeed, we Jewish people have been building a great, shining American tower, and we have just about reached the highest heavens. But in our own century, we are waking up to the fact that our astounding success in America is a Pyrrhic victory. Our own children and grandchildren, raised as white American children of privilege, have completely forgotten who built their place in society, or why their well-meaning ancestors so passionately endeavored to build it. Many [no longer value](#) their essential Jewishness in their worldviews or life plans. For most, the success built by American Jews is indistinguishable from general American white, privileged success. That young woman was right in noticing that most white Americans — Jewish, WASP or otherwise — can’t or don’t fully notice how people of color are trapped by racist structures of power. They can’t even identify how racism infuses all aspects of our lives, our choices and our expectations of themselves and others, despite good intentions.

You might think I’m not being entirely fair. Yes, most of us and our children are a part of white America now. But we know plenty of young Jewish Americans who are very proudly Jewish. Many are devoted to Israel, devoted to good causes; they fight racism and other injustices. But if we are going to take our American-ness and our Jewishness seriously, we must own all the ways that we have benefited from and continue to benefit from the worst elements of American racist culture.

I write about racism and Jewish identity not because we are not good people. I write about this because in recognizing race as central in American Jewish identity, we cannot only more effectively use our success in this country for good purposes, but we can return truly to the essence of what being Jewish in the world really means.

Our people have been known by many names over the centuries. Once, we were called Hebrews. In Hebrew, the word is “Ivri,” which translates as “the other” or “from somewhere else.” We were also called “B’nai Yisrael,” the Children of Israel. Yisra’el literally means “struggling with God.” We are to be the ones who struggle with ultimate issues of life, of values, of justice. Through the centuries, our moments of power have been all too fleeting. Mostly, our hope has been to be tolerated. From our place at the periphery, we have responded always with the ability to critique injustice, to adopt the cause of the oppressed, to envision a better and more just world. Even in times when we participated fully in non-Jewish societies, we always knew that we stood with one foot in the mainstream, and one foot outside.

America is unique in Jewish history because the social construct of power and oppression in this society came to be based more on skin color than on religion or ethnic identity. Because of that, along with the best of American values and our own hard work, we now find ourselves as another privileged white ethnicity. Despite our only good intentions, we are — all of us — full participants and beneficiaries of the American evil known as racism.

*[Only white people can save themselves from racism and white supremacy]*

The brilliance of being Jewish, though, is that we stubbornly refuse to fit into any social construct of power or oppression. We are simply Ivri’im, people from “somewhere else,” people who struggle with God and justice, who demand that the rest of the world does, too, and see every human life as sacred because we are all in the image of God. And the truth is, we have never belonged to one race alone. The Torah tells us that we left Egypt with the “[erev rav](#),” with a mixed multitude of peoples. Around the world there are Jews of color, Asian Jews, Jews of all

kinds. The idea that Jews are white is **not only ridiculous**, it's offensive to who we really are! Yes, societies like America come along sometimes and give us privileges and powerful labels like "white." In America's racist social construct, Jews are very much white people, but we must never again think of ourselves that way — it's time for us to opt out of that racist paradigm, because we are Jews.

Imagine what we and our children could be like if we associate our Jewishness with an essential statement against racism and discrimination. Even though we and our children have benefited from the best schools and jobs and housing that whiteness affords, we can be the ones to challenge the system from within. We can be the ones who change business practices, housing codes, policing, correctional facilities, social policies, unequal schools — motivated by our values and our Jewish historical experience. Indeed, so many progressive leaders in this country have been Jews (including some **Jewish founders of the NAACP**), motivated exactly by this vision. But so many more of us need to own our real power, which is not our whiteness, but our Jewishness, our Torah and our tradition that motivates us to remember the stranger, for we were strangers in Egypt; that calls on us to lift up the cause of all those who are oppressed.

Of course, the racist power structures that we need to fight against are not so easily cast aside. No matter whether we call ourselves white or not, Jews will still be less likely than people of color to be stopped — or shot — by police, will still be unlikely to face discrimination in school, at work, in real estate, from banks. But we can still reckon more fully with those advantages, and refuse to accept them unthinkingly. And we must use the clout that accrues from them to work to erase those inequalities for future generations.

Our **great sage Hillel** taught that Torah boiled down to this: "What is hateful to you, do not do to others. All the rest is commentary." If we let Hillel's wisdom guide the way, then Jews in America today can go live proudly as Jews, as a light to the nations. May we all be that light in this world that so badly needs repair.

## Why a bunch of rabbis went to Baltimore to protest — and pray

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