What Is a Jew of Color?¹
Hen Mazzig, 1/30/2020
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With the surge of identity politics in the United States and Europe, there is a vigorous debate about the place of the Jewish community within the racial identity sociological construct. In these discussions, a frequent hot topic is whether Jews are classified as white. Numerous articles and op-eds have been devoted to this issue.

Some Jews insist there are “white Jews,” while others contend all Jews are “people of color” — not white or of European ancestry — including ones with recent European heritage or ethnically Caucasian converts to Judaism.

As someone considered a “person of color” by this definition, regardless of my Jewishness, I find the truth lies somewhere in the middle.

I understand why some Jews claim using the term “white Jews” acknowledges internal communal intolerance. Although nowhere in Jewish texts and tradition was it ever suggested people with fair skin are superior, Jewish society is not immune to the disease of colorism. Our community exists in a world where anyone with a darker skin tone is marginalized.

Jews who have African, Middle Eastern, Latino and Asian heritage face discrimination and underrepresentation in Jewish life. For many, calling Jews with pale skin “white” acknowledges the disparities we face.

However, the term “white Jew” often is divisively used to scapegoat Jews for white supremacy,² not to talk about inequalities within our community. Anti-Semites seek to align Jews with the very ideology that massacres us.³

The term has been co-opted by anti-Israel advocates, who associate Jews with whiteness to deny our historical connection to Israel. They attempt to vilify the re-established Jewish state as “white” and therefore, an illegitimate colonial entity.

Given how anti-Semites exploit the identification, I understand why some Jews reject "whiteness."

¹ With this headline, Mazzig may have intended to allude to the essay “Who is an Arab Jew?” by the Zionist postcolonial thinker Albert Memmi, who was himself a brilliant theorist and a leftist of North African Jewish origins.
² Mazzig emphasizes the ways in which charges of white supremacy are mobilized against Israel. In the United States, however, anti-Semitism has long been excused on the basis of claims that Jews are white or are especially responsible for (or representative of) white supremacy. Examples can be found in the more nuanced writings of James Baldwin and in the brazenly and uncomplicatedly anti-Semitic speeches of Louis Farrakhan. See James Baldwin, “Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They’re Anti-White,” New York Times, April 9, 1967.
³ Jews continue to be a primary target of white supremacists around the world. Anti-Semitism is the linchpin of white supremacist conspiracy theories, and white supremacists in the United States and Europe routinely attempt to murder Jews.
However, in a recent Pew study, **94% of American Jews** chose to identify as white. While we are a minority with a long history of persecution by racists for not being viewed as “white,” Jews themselves do not self-identify as “other”; they accept whiteness on their own terms.

But race is not just about skin tone; people of color come in all shades. Many of us pass as Caucasian. Just as people of color with fair skin do not fully enjoy white privilege, neither do Jews with recent European descent. As soon as you are identified as a Jew, you are not a member of white society, you are a target.

Notwithstanding this, to assert Ashkenazi Jews face the same challenges as Mizrahim, Beta Israel or Kaifeng Jews (people of color) is inaccurate. It’s also often tainted with colorism. Tellingly, those who claim all Jews are people of color fully accept the blackness of Beta Israel and black Jews, but then police how lighter-skinned Mizrahim identify.

Regardless of how pale I am, as a Middle Eastern man, I get stopped at airports in the United States and Europe, observed suspiciously for my features and interrogated about the origin of my name and accent. American Ashkenazi Jews don’t normally face this the same way, even if we both are victimized by anti-Semitism.

When people argue we must drop the term “Jews of color,” they’re really asking us to disregard the diversity of the Jewish community. It is insulting to our lived experiences. We are fighting for a society where all Jews are treated equally – but we are not living in it. Erasing that truth only keeps us locked in the cycle of oppression.  

As for the anti-Semites who weaponize Jewish diversity to attack Israel: Indigeneity does not depend on race. Your skin color does not determine the origin of your ancestors. Ashkenazi Jews are just as indigenous to the land of Israel as Ethiopian Jews. Branding Jewish people as uniquely responsible for the oppressive heritage of whiteness speaks to your racism, not ours.

Jews must be able to define ourselves without others overriding us. That is why I will not tell other Jews how to identify. I find it preposterous that some will do that to me.

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4 The problematic discourse of “colorblindness” mobilizes a fiction of a post-racial society to delegitimize the lived experiences of People of Color and to ignore the histories, biases, and structures of oppression that continue to shape American (and global) cultures, politics, and economies.

5 Even “white Jews,” or “white-passing Jews,” maintain a legitimate connection to the Land of Israel. The fact of their ancestors having lived in Europe for some period of time does not change the history of colonization, expulsion, and persecution that forcibly separated their Israelite ancestors from their homeland.