



‘We Jews are not a race’:

A rabbi of color speaks personally on Yom Kippur

By Angela Warnick Buchdahl

September 28, 2020

This essay is adapted from the sermon Rabbi Angela Buchdahl delivered to Manhattan’s Central Synagogue, where she has been senior rabbi since 2013. Buchdahl was the first Asian-American to be ordained as a rabbi and, before that, the first to be ordained as a cantor.

Are you Jewish? Are you Jewish? Are you Jewish? Are you Jewish?

The Lubavitchers parked their Mitzvah Tank at the corner of my college post office, and asked this question repeatedly, like a jingle. In the early 1990s, Yale was about 25% Jewish. Most of my Jewish friends were accosted multiple times each day.

But not once in four years did they ever ask me.

I would have liked some free Shabbat candles. Or to sit in their makeshift sukkah. Or just to have been acknowledged as a Member of the Tribe.

And the Orthodox weren’t the only ones. I led Yale’s Reform minyan: I chanted Torah, I read the entire liturgy in Hebrew, all while wearing a tallit, but inevitably, someone would come up afterwards and ask, “Are you Jewish?”

I know what you’re thinking. I don’t exactly have the “Jewish look.” You think of Jews as a people, with Jewish surnames, Jewish features, even our own genetic diseases.

I understood what the community was telling me. That Jewish peoplehood was akin to race. Something immutable and hereditary. An exclusive club you had to be born into.

And even though I had a Jewish father, with my Asian-American face, I would never *really* be Jewish.

Jewish Peoplehood is powerful and real, but too often we misunderstand what that means. Starting with: we Jews are not a race.

‘We Jews have never been just one color’

The earliest biblical reference to the Israelite people as a race is made by Pharaoh in Egypt. He used it to justify our enslavement, and to kill our firstborns. He stoked racist fear that the Israelites would grow to outnumber Egyptians and rise up against them.

Pharaoh's message to his subjects echoes through the centuries — it's what the white supremacists chanted in Charlottesville: *Jews will not replace us*.

The first historical articulation of Judaism as a race was during the Spanish Inquisition. Even those who converted to Christianity, were still seen as polluted with impure bloodlines. Later the Nazis used pseudo-science to systematically dehumanize Jews and claim that there were identifiable racial features and a genetic propensity in Jews toward certain behaviors and beliefs.

The notion of Judaism as a “race” is a construct — one created by our enemies— to justify antisemitism, violence, and even genocide.

And yet, we Jews still cling to this idea that there is something immutable about us — a genetic type, “a look” — that makes us what we are.

But we Jews have never been just one color, or one cluster of chromosomes. When the Torah first calls us a People, coming out of Egypt, we are described as an *erev rav*, a “mixed multitude.” And when we were exiled from Jerusalem, more than 2,000 years ago, we spread out to every imaginable corner of the world.

Jews went to India, Yemen, Russia, China, and Ethiopia. The majority of Israeli Jews today are Jews of Color from Middle Eastern, African, and Asian countries.

And in America, the assumption that Jews are white is outdated.

A lot has changed in the Jewish community since I was growing up. The American Jewish community has become a lot more diverse, and a lot more aware of its diversity. But I have been speaking with many Jews of Color recently, and realizing how much work we still have to do, right in our own house.

‘Like a perpetual stranger’

In 2019, the first Jewish population study to measure Jews of Color in America found that we are at least 12-15% of American Jews. That is about 1 in every 7 Jews — about 1 million people. One. Million. Jews of Color.

You might be thinking, “I don't believe that. I don't see them anywhere in my Jewish community.” And you're right. We need to do some soul-searching and ask why that is.

One Friday night this summer, after a Black rabbinical student preached from my congregation's pulpit, a Black congregant in his 20s reached out to share his experiences in our community.

He told me that the first time he walked into Central Synagogue, a security guard trailed him and watched him suspiciously. He almost didn't return after that. But he loved coming to Shabbat services — back when you could actually, you know, *come* to services — even though he said he faced questions from congregants every single week.

What neighborhood are you from? Who are you here with? Are you Jewish?

You might hear this story and excuse it as well-meaning curiosity. But imagine that this was his experience walking into Bergdorf Goodman: He is regarded with suspicion the minute he walks

in the door, with overt curiosity about what he is doing there, and an assumption that he does not belong. We would clearly see that as racism.

But somehow, in synagogue, we feel justified in our assumptions and prejudices — because we regard Judaism as a race.

I don't think it's overt racism that prompts a congregant to ask an Asian mother in our lobby if she is the babysitter. Or to give a Black congregant a drink order at a synagogue gathering. But the impact of these seemingly innocent questions is undeniable: Jews of Color experience racism in our community.

If you “look Jewish,” you don't get asked these questions; these are questions that only get asked of “strangers.” So because Jews of Color are asked these questions every time we walk into a Jewish community, that's exactly how we feel: Like a perpetual stranger.

It's exhausting.

I remember meeting with a couple before their wedding. The bride was a Southern-born Protestant who grew up going to church every Sunday. She was intrigued by Judaism and open to conversion. She asked her fiancé, “What does being Jewish mean to you?”

He replied: “I'm not that religious. Judaism is more my culture and identity. It's the feeling that I can walk into a party, and just pick out the Jews in the room.”

She looked at him. And so did his Asian rabbi. “So would you pick us out in the room?” I asked.

That couple got married, but she never converted.

The Nazis borrowed from the Americans

Letting go of the idea of a Jewish race is difficult, because there is a real comfort in expecting that we can “pick out our own.” And there is pride in feeling that there is something inherited, genetic, even divinely ordained, about Jewish Chosenness.

But making our identity a tribal race is not only exclusive, it's dangerous. Because race is not scientific.

Geneticists and anthropologists agree that race is a human construct with no real basis in biology. “The idea of race was,” wrote Ashley Montagu, a 20th century British-American anthropologist, “the deliberate creation of an exploiting class seeking to maintain and defend its privileges.” Or, as the writer Ta Nahisi Coates bluntly says: “Race is the child of racism, not the father.”

This idea is brilliantly fleshed out in Isabel Wilkerson's groundbreaking new book, “Caste.” She convincingly shows how race has been manipulated to create hierarchies of human value — to assert the supremacy of one race over the inferiority of another. Whether it was Blacks in America, Untouchables in India or Jews in Nazi Germany, Wilkerson shows how these societies positioned the lowest caste through a perverse portrayal of the inferiority and pollution of their ancestry and other immutable traits — from birth.

These corrupted views of race were used in remarkably similar ways to create caste systems across time and geography.

For example, did you know that when Hitler created his caste system in order to exterminate the Jewish “race,” the Third Reich actually studied America’s race laws for ideas? James Whitman, a law professor at Yale University, wrote that in the 1930s, the United States was “the leading racist jurisdiction in the world,” so Nazi lawyers “looked very closely at” and “were ultimately influenced by American race law.”

In particular, Nazis admired the Jim Crow-era laws that discriminated and segregated Black Americans from white Americans. They adopted the anti-miscegenation laws that banned mixed-race marriages, “something radical Nazis were very eager to do in Germany,” Whitman said.

At the time in Germany, “intermarriage” rates between Jews and Aryans were more than 60%, so it was difficult to define who was Jewish and who was not.

Here again the Nazis borrowed from the Americans. As late as 1890, the United States Census included categories for those who were “one-quarter Black” (quadroon) or one-eighth (octaroon). The Nuremberg laws of 1930s Germany defined a Jew as anyone with at least one Jewish grandparent, regardless of religious practice.

Through these laws, the Nazis established a caste system that put Jews at the bottom: as *untermenschen* — subhuman. This dehumanizing view of Jews as an inferior race was critical in enabling the Nazis to persuade Germans to participate or stand by indifferently to the murder of 6million Jews.

It was a caste system that the Nazis learned in great part by studying the legal caste system we created for Black Americans.

Who is a Jew?

After World War II, when the State of Israel was founded, with a mission to take in Jewish refugees, Israel, incredibly, adopted our Nazi enemy’s definition of one-quarter Jewish ancestry as the foundation of who was eligible for the Law of Return. I was taught that Israel defined “Who is a Jew” by saying: “If it’s enough Jewish blood to get you killed, It would be enough Jewish blood to get you saved.”

This “one Jewish grandparent” definition for the Law of Return does not, however, match Israel’s definition for Jewish status for things like marriage, which requires proof of Jewish matrilineage. This results in a shameful condition where immigrants can be considered Jewish enough to come to Israel, become citizens, fight in the Israeli Army and even die for the Jewish state, but then not be considered Jewish enough to be buried in a Jewish cemetery!

Once again, defaulting to a racial definition of “Jewish blood” creates a most problematic definition of Jewish peoplehood.

I don’t deny that heredity is an important, meaningful element for our People. It is powerful to imagine an ancestral line of Jews going all the way back to Sinai. But I’m suggesting that it is

time to stop thinking of Jewish Peoplehood as a race. Instead, think of Jewish Peoplehood as a family.

Race is something we view as inherited and unchanging, but there are many ways to become family.

You can be family through birth. But also adoption. Or choice, like conversion. You can even become the closest of family through a covenant, as one does in marriage.

Our covenant with God is the foundation of Jewish Peoplehood.

We read about it in the Torah on Yom Kippur. *“Atem nitzavim,”* — you stand, all of you, before God: leaders and commoners, grown-ups and children, the stranger and convert — into this sworn covenant I make with you today.

Instead of defining Jewishness by having the correct fraction of Jewish blood, let every Jew who feels bound by this covenant be seen, and counted, as part of the Jewish people.

‘Are you Jewish?’

I want to end with a story. A few years ago, I was walking on the Upper West Side, on Broadway and there was a Mitzvah Tank parked on the corner. I saw a boy, not yet Bar Mitzvah age, in a black hat and suit, and as I hurried past, he stepped right in front of me, looked me straight in the eye and asked: “Are you Jewish?”

I stopped in my tracks. I had to hold myself back from my enormous urge to embrace the boy. “YES!” I said excitedly. “Yes, I AM JEWISH! Thank you VERY MUCH!”

The young boy, confused by my passionate response, shrugged his shoulders and offered me a box of candles: “Happy Hanukkah,” he said and walked away.

The boy thought nothing of it, but I’ve replayed that moment many times since. It was my Hanukkah miracle. He gave me a taste of a Jewish Peoplehood that was beyond race. Where the color of my skin, the shape of my features, were no longer the markers of my belonging or authenticity. In that young Hasid’s question was a revolutionary assumption, one that could truly change the world. That he could see me, and imagine me, as part of the same family.

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