

Insider/Outsider: Jews, Race, and Privilege

*“When Jews perceive themselves as vulnerable, they compare themselves to the dominant cultural community, who have...discriminated against them. When other minority groups look at [white] Jews, however... Jews look settled and safe.”*¹

—Cheryl Greenberg

*“I came here and it was... ‘You’re Egyptian-Iraqi? You don’t know bagels and cream cheese? Then you can’t be Jewish.’”*²

—Rachel Wahba

[As a gentile African American] *“I always expect Jews to be my allies. It’s a surprise to me when they aren’t. I never expect gentile white people to be my allies, it’s a surprise to me when they are.”*³

—Akaya Windwood

As U.S. Jews, we embody the fluidity of race and ethnicity, and the interplay between privilege (unearned advantage) and vulnerability. On a skin color spectrum we vary from pale to olive, brown, and black. For light-skinned Ashkenazim, “We are the closest of the coloreds to white, or the closest of the whites to colored.”⁴ Our privilege shifts: we are given racial advantage, we marginalize other Jews, we are targets, we are racist ourselves. Sometimes we are allies across racial and ethnic lines. We are also dark-skinned Ashkenazi Jews of color, Mizrahi, Sephardic, multiethnic, and multiracial. And more.

“Jews complicate things”:⁵

slices from a racial continuum

Forced to wander from our Middle Eastern roots, beginning in 70 C E, Jews dispersed worldwide. Some intermarried, some were raped, some non-Jews converted. Today our racial and ethnic categories vary, depending on where our geographic journeys took us, our current class status, our generation...and how we self-identify. “Jews,” points out Lewis Ricardo Gordon of Temple University’s Institute for the Study of Race and Social Thought, “are among the most racially diverse people on the globe.”⁶

Ever notice how a “white” Ashkenazi Jew from the Bronx gains “color” in Indiana or Arkansas? In a strictly black/white binary, some white Ashkenazi Jews blur boundaries, spilling over edges, even feeling erased when called white. Meanwhile, Jews of color (a term some do not relate to)—of Middle Eastern, African, Latino, Native American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Portuguese, or Spanish descent, and/or from multiethnic backgrounds⁷—defy rigid racial classifications. Those who do not present as “white” may not be recognized as Jews.

Egyptian-Iraqi refugee Rachel Wahba was born in India, grew up in Japan. Ridiculed there as “crumbo” (literally: blackie), she remembers thinking at age eight, “I will sell my soul to be white.”⁸ But as a 1960s teenager, after finally gaining entry to the States, to her amazement her peers ogled, “Wow, where’d you get your tan?”⁹ Third Wave feminist writer Ophira Edut says that her dark-skinned Iranian-American Sephardic father saw himself as white: “Jews can and do swing both ways,” she concludes.¹⁰

Loolwa Khazzoom, a founder of the Jewish multicultural movement who was raised in 1970s California, identifies as a light-skinned woman of color. “In the non-Jewish people of color world, I am accepted if I am Iraqi, but don’t say I am an Iraqi Jew. As soon as I add the Jew, I get shit.”¹¹

That comment resonates with educator Shoshana Simons, who is of mixed Ashkenazi-Sephardi Turkish heritage. Her keen sense of being Jewish supersedes social constructions of ethnicity and race. “That hyperawareness of difference: ‘Yes, but I’m always a Jew.’”¹² When she first visited Istanbul to reconnect with her roots: “I felt like I ‘belonged’ in how I looked. And I felt like an outsider as a Jew. The fact is, to be a Diaspora Jew [in the U.S.] is my identity, outside of being Sephardi. I say that not to wipe out the real material effects of racial and social oppression, but as a baseline for alliances across our early 21st century differences.”¹³

On a racial continuum, for some white-ish Ashkenazi women it’s tricky to slot ourselves. Growing up in 1940s Detroit, Marge Piercy remembers “I was not white and I was not Black, but something in between. Jews...were kept out of most neighborhoods...as were the Blacks.”¹⁴ Karen Brodtkin, a child of the 1950s, wrote the groundbreaking book *How the Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*. The women in her Brooklyn/suburban family “felt different...in relation to ‘the blond people’” but “in relation to African Americans, we experienced ourselves as mainstream and white.”¹⁵ And 1960s Freedom Rider Ellen Broms was arrested with others when they sat down in a Houston coffee shop. Charged with unlawful assembly, at the jail Broms declined to state her race; so she was booked as “Negro,” classified “High Yellow,” and put in the “tank” for black women—because of her complexion and dark hair.¹⁶

Elly: claiming the identity— “white Jew”

In our Jewish women’s group, we posed more questions about our racial identity and privilege than we answered. Growing up in a 1960s Chicago working-class neighborhood, a landscape shell-shocked from the Nazi Shoah, Elly is quick-witted, brimming with insight. “To not call myself white would be to minimize that which is in my bones.” She paused. “It’s like breathing, how much I take for granted my privilege: the safety I do feel, not being bombarded 24/7 by racism.”¹⁷

Ardently she claims the identity “white Jew: separate from white non-Jew, separate from non-Jew of color. I can go out of my way to understand racial injustice, but it still won’t be in my pores. The world is designed for us; that’s the norm.” Her eyes flew around the table. “I’m not aware of what it’s like to try and get a job, or a house, or a bank loan, if you’re not white.”

She believes, she said, that there is conscious intent to teach racial superiority to folks with white skin, “and that does not make any of us bad.”

Commanding our attention, Elly juxtaposed the tension of white privilege and anti-Semitism, the “amazing pull to rule out one or the other, as if they were contradictory realities. Like now I am either a privileged white person, or I am a targeted Jew. How do I acknowledge that both can be true at the same time?”

Deena: “I’m off-white”

Soft-spoken, with a keen intelligence and quick laugh, Deena is multiracial, multicultural. Her Iraqi father grew up in India before immigrating to the United States; her mother is a white Ashkenazi baby-boomer from the Midwest. She experienced moving in and out of whiteness in her Los Angeles hometown. When a close Christian friend literally shut her out on Christmas, the exclusion stung. Even worse was being ridiculed in junior high as a “big-nosed Jew.” She recoiled from the hostility.

From childhood, Deena’s alliance with African Americans was unquestioned, a lesson from her grandfather. During a 1960s race riot, his was the only white-owned neighborhood store left unscathed; “black brother” was written on his door.

But when Deena tried to integrate her Arab-Jewish culture into her beloved Zionist youth group, her Mizrahi side was ignored. After she ululated, someone cried “Intifada!”¹⁸ “That’s Iraqi-Jewish,” Deena told them. “No,” they insisted, “that’s Palestinian.” “No. The way I’m doing it is Iraqi-Jewish,” she explained patiently. “They couldn’t accept the idea,” she told our group, “that you can be Arab and Jewish.”

Upon visiting Israel, she found another version of bias. When her Iraqi uncle tried to rent in one neighborhood, he was told: “Those apartments are reserved for western immigrants.” Read: Ashkenazi. When she told the story to her Israeli Ashkenazi peers, they scolded “You’re American, don’t even comment.” She frowned, “They want me to just be Ashkenazi.” How to fit in, with all of herself? Sighing, Deena admitted that with only one other Middle Eastern Jew in our group, part of her story never emerged; there just weren’t many occasions to hear someone reflect back, “Yeah, that was my experience, too.” Raised in mostly Ashkenazi environments, but with a vibrant Iraqi-Indian Jewish culture as well, and with olive skin, she felt: “I’m off-white.”

Rani: “lighter is better”

Rani’s parents divorced when she was three. Her Mizrahi father grew up in Baghdad; her Polish maternal grandfather survived Auschwitz. In her early twenties, with dark curls growing out after shaving her head, Rani is sometimes provocative, often hilarious, always self-confident and thoughtful. There’s a rebellious compelling air about her. Having recently moved to San Francisco from Montreal, “I’ve started feeling like Jews are Other. Not quite people of color, but not the dominant

white thing.”

She told us that her mother’s Ashkenazi family, with whom she mostly lived, hates her father’s side, “because they’re Iraqi Jews. The ultimate insult was that I was ‘just like the Iraqis.’” In that world, she stands out because she’s darker. But when she spent summers with her father’s family, they berated her the same way: “You’re too polite, in a chicken kind of way. You’re just like the Ashkenazis.”

Rani’s Mizrahi family instructs, “You’re an Iraqi Jew, because that’s where we were born. But you’re not an Iraqi, you’re a Jew; Arabs are one people and Jews are another.” She said that they don’t consider themselves, or Arabs, to be people of color. “I think internationally there is this belief: ‘lighter is better.’”

Illustrating her point, she told us about her last visit to her Ashkenazi family in Florida. “I asked them, ‘Do you think Jewish people are white?’ ‘Of course!’ ‘Really, what about Jews from Iraq?’ I asked. ‘No, they’re dark,’ they told me. ‘Well, am I white?’ I asked. ‘Uh, no,’ they replied. ‘Are you white?’ I questioned. ‘Yes,’ they said. There was just silence at the table,” Rani murmured. “And they changed the subject.”