

Judaism, Jewish History and Social Justice: How Defining “Who is a Jew?” Tells Us How to Fix the World

Marc Dollinger

San Francisco State University

ABSTRACT

American Jewish approaches to social justice can best be understood by investigating the various definitions of “who is a Jew?” Those definitions changed over time and place as Jews lived in the ancient land of Israel or in the diaspora. Each approach to defining one’s Jewishness mandates a different understanding of social justice issues and differing requirements to respond. Unlike other religious communities that demand a sole faith-based membership test, Jews define themselves across a variety of identity markers, each with its own social justice imperatives.

In Israel, the history of Zionism has splintered Jews into different social justice camps. In the United States, a large majority of Jews identify as liberal, engaging in social justice work from the post-war civil rights movement to contemporary immigration debates. While many American Jews contend their social justice mandate grows from their religious tradition, the larger political culture shaped Jewish activism more than textual mandates. What seemed a Jewish ethnic revival in the 1960s actually reflected an Americanist embrace. Only in that decade of ethnic awareness would Jews present their social justice work in religious terms. In contemporary America, Jews of color are redefining attitudes towards social justice as religious and racial categories merge.

The study of Judaism offers important new perspectives for clergy interested in how American Jews engage in social justice work. Unlike other religious traditions, Judaism counts multiple definitions of “who is a Jew,” some of which complement one another while others can stand in conflict. When those definitions are imposed over thousands of years of Jewish history, we can learn how different Jews in different times and different places all claim a Jewish basis for their activism, even as each embraces a different definition for Judaism. Sometimes Jewish social justice work grows from classic theological mandates in the Hebrew Bible. Other times, though, Jews credit Jewishness even when they identify secular sources as their inspiration. For clergy across different faith communities, a critical look at American Jewish political activism encourages a re-examination of all religion-based approaches to social justice work.

At its most fundamental level, the Jewish mandate for social justice activism depends on how we answer Judaism’s most basic and debated question: who is a Jew? While Christians can offer a straight-forward faith-based test—do you accept Jesus as the Messiah?—Jewish law does not demand faith for membership. Instead, it embraces a matrilineal definition of Jewishness: if someone is born to a Jewish mother, s/he counts as a Jew, regardless of their level of faith, education, or even communal engagement. It is possible, then, never to attend synagogue, refuse all Jewish education, deny the existence of God and, as long as you have a Jewish mother, still enjoy status as a Jew, even among the most stringent rabbis.

The definition of “who is a Jew” matters in social justice because it offers guidance on the all-important question of authority. For those Jews who adhere to traditional Judaism, obligations to engage in justice work and the very definition of what constitutes “social justice” must grow from Biblical text, rabbinic text, or other sources of Jewish law. Jews who embraced modern forms of Judaism after the European Enlightenment in the 18th century will apply a rational lens to their definition while nationalist Jews who reject faith but embrace a Zionist outlook will frame their obligations through the needs of a modern Jewish nation-state. Even as these different Jewish notions of what defines social justice may appear confusing, they gain clarity when we connect an understanding of one’s Jewishness to the authority and mandates each “who is a Jew” definition offers.

In Judaism’s traditional explanation of who is a Jew, God has chosen the Jews and established a covenantal relationship with them. As quoted in Genesis 22:17, God promised to make Jews as numerous as the stars in the sky and sands in the sea while Jews agreed to accept Torah, God’s word, to guide their lives. The Jewish people’s chosen-ness, then, encourages them to observe the Torah’s 613 commandments, both as a way to become closer to God and hasten the coming of the Messiah. But, even if they reject these covenantal obligations, even if they reject their faith, they will still enjoy standing as full-fledged Jews. Judaism means more than faith. It includes a variety of qualities beyond theology.

Jewish sovereignty over the Biblical land of Israel, for example, developed as a critical part of ancient Judaism’s definition. The Torah itself counts a return to Zion as central to what it means to be a Jew. When the Israelites left Egypt and eventually entered the Promised Land, they established sovereignty, built a Temple to practice their faith, and rebuilt a Second Temple after the Babylonian exile. Instead of a pure faith-based religious expression, Jews considered themselves Jews solely because they lived in the Jewish homeland under Jewish rule. Zionism showed their Judaism and Jewish identity as much as faith did. In the ancient period, a Jew’s ability to travel to Jerusalem and offer a sacrifice to God at the Temple fulfilled their

religious obligations. Without Jewish nationalism as a component of Jewishness, ancient Jews could not practice their religion.

The definition of who is a Jew changed yet again when the Romans invaded Jerusalem and destroyed the Second Temple in 70 CE, sending the Jewish people into exile. Jewish leaders faced an unprecedented challenge: how to practice Judaism without a Temple. In the centuries that followed, rabbinic Judaism developed. Individual rabbis formed communities throughout the world, taking direction from the developing Talmud, which offered a set of Jewish laws anchoring Jewish practice. With this new civil code, Jews could maintain their communities even under threat from hostile rulers. The Talmud, then, formed a large part of Judaism's definition even though it was not strictly a faith-based document.

In the modern era, Jewishness added several denominations, each seeking to align the traditional mandates of Judaism with the promised emancipation of Jews in Europe. Reform Judaism, the first group to emerge, applied an ethical monotheist frame to modern Jewish life. Reviewing the 613 commandments in the Torah, Reform theologians held tight to rational religious mandates as relevant in the modern world. They rejected ancient traditions that they believed were superstitious. Unless it could pass a logic and rationality test, a commandment had no place in the modern world. In order to make these changes, classical Reform Jews rejected the divine nature of the Torah and eventually centered on the prophetic writings as key to their theology and the social justice work that followed. Rather than focus on the day-to-day Jewish living mandates of the Talmud, this new group of modern Jews read about the lives and choices of the prophets, aspiring to model their own good work on the examples set by Isaiah and his cohort. Too radical a change for many, Reform met resistance from more tradition-bound rabbis who founded a Conservative movement that sought a middle ground between Orthodox Judaism and Reform. Later, American Jews reinvented Jewish practice yet again with a Reconstructionist movement based on the writings of Mordecai Kaplan and Renewal Judaism that sought to join much of the 1960s counterculture with Jewish spiritual practice.

With an ancient definition of "who is a Jew" that extends beyond faith and the development of denominationalism in the modern period, Jews in contemporary America looked as well to a variety of ethnic, religious, and nationalist attributes for guidance on how to live their lives in a meaningful way. Recent demographic surveys report an increasing number of Jews who identify primarily as cultural Jews, secular Jews, Jews with "no-religion," or, a category growing in popularity, "just Jewish." These respondents would fail a faith-based Jewish membership test. While theology remains a central feature of Judaism, so too do secular attributes such as culture, law, history, peoplehood, and political sovereignty. "Bagels and lox" Jews, then, reflect an identity deeply-rooted in a definition of Judaism that expands beyond the limits of faith and practice.¹

Defining "who is a Jew" made for one of the most fascinating and debated case studies: Brother Daniel. In this example, the Jewish parents of a boy named Oswald Rufeisen hid their son in a Catholic convent when the Nazis invaded Poland. Immersed in Catholic living, the young Jew decided to convert, eventually becoming a friar in the Discalced Carmelite Order. Known as Brother Daniel, he immigrated to the new State of Israel, claiming himself a Jew by virtue of his Jewish mother. Under Israel's Law of Return, enacted to provide immediate relief for Jewish Holocaust refugees, any person deemed a Jew would enjoy immediate citizenship in Israel. Brother Daniel opted to immigrate to Israel as a Jew because he was born to a Jewish

mother, even though he was a converted Catholic.

When Israeli government officials noticed Brother Daniel wearing a cross and dressed in the clothing of a Catholic religious leader, they refused to declare him Jewish, making him ineligible for immediate Israeli citizenship under the law of return. The State of Israel claimed that a Jew who converts to another religion ceases to be a Jew. When Brother Daniel's case went public, many Israelis sided with the government's position. How can a Catholic priest ever be considered a Jew? If Judaism is, at its core, a faith tradition, then rejecting it for a different faith should be disqualifying. By definition, Catholic priests cannot be Jews.

Yet, some in Israel's ultra-Orthodox Jewish religious community backed Brother Daniel. As they read Jewish law, only God can determine who is a Jew, and God determines Jewishness through the religious status of the mother. Since Daniel fit the technical definition of Jewishness, he should be considered Jewish. In this thinking, no ordinary person has the power to undo God's will. Since it was God who made Daniel Jewish by birthing him from a Jewish mother, God intended to count Daniel as a Jew. Any ruling by the government otherwise would amount to a rejection of the Almighty. In a civil case that moved all the way to the Israeli Supreme Court, a landmark 1962 ruling rejected Daniel's claim of Jewishness. It amended Israel's law of return to add a faith-based litmus test for inclusion as a Jew. In Israel at least, Jews are not allowed to embrace a faith other than Judaism.

To illustrate these points, I open my lower-division entry-level survey course "Introduction to Jewish Studies" at San Francisco State University with the following statement: "You know, you can be Jewish and NOT believe in God." Within seconds, half my students drop their chins in a look of surprise and disbelief. These, I figure, are my Christian undergraduates who cannot imagine membership in a faith community without faith. For students raised in Christianity, belief in God must be the central feature defining their religious status. To hear from a professor that an atheist Jew counts equally with a believing Jew confounds logic and their own religious upbringing.

Then I proclaim, "You know, if you're Jewish, you need to embrace Zionism, the Jewish people's age-old quest for political autonomy in their ancient homeland." And since San Francisco and my university are situated in a leftist and often anti-Zionist political culture, the other half of the students in the class drop their chins in disbelief (or upset) when they learn that Zionism, most widely known as a modern political movement, rooted itself in ancient Jewish texts. These, I imagine, are my Jewish students. Raised in a nation that bifurcates religious identity from national status, American Jews have always struggled with notions of dual loyalty. How can they be loyal and patriotic American citizens if they owe nationalist fidelity to the Jewish state? Ever since the U.S. Constitution separated Church and State, American Jews have struggled to reconcile the age-old nationalist component of their Judaism. American Zionism, in this framing, proves an oxymoron. With this course opening, I am ready to begin a fifteen-week overview of Jewish Studies focused on answering that basic question: who is a Jew?

The very definition of Jewishness, then, offers the platform we need to explore how and why Jewish religious leaders explain their social justice work. Because Jewishness proves so open to varying definitions, Jewish social justice advocates can fashion their political work on competing interpretations of Jewish text and tradition. Neither the political left nor right, the religiously observant nor the secular can claim a monopoly on determining how Jewish beliefs should inform social justice activism. As we will see, Jews from

different ends of the political spectrum call on differing definitions of who is a Jew to defend their positions. Among faith-centered Jews, denominational differences lend themselves to profound disagreement in social justice viewpoints.

Of greatest interest in the current political climate, almost every non-Orthodox Jew opposed Trump in the 2016 election. Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Renewal Jews define Judaism in more universalist language, extending their social justice mandate to all U.S. citizens as well as those who wish to become Americans. The nation's Orthodox community counts many supporters of the Republican standard bearer in its ranks. Observant Jews adopt a particularist definition for social justice and place religious Zionism at the center of their political agenda. They do not enter the social justice public square, preferring instead to support more Jewish-centered issues and causes.²

Israeli Jews animate this complexity. To the surprise of many, polls indicate that only 1 in 5 Jews living in their ancient homeland identify as "religious" while the other 80% claim a secular nationalist definition of their Jewishness. Belief in God does not determine their religiosity. Instead, their Israeli passports do.³ Nationalism means more than faith in the determination of "who is a Jew." The recent embrace of President Donald Trump by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu illustrates the point. For the Israeli leader, the U.S. president's slogan of "America First" and hyper-nationalism aligns with right-wing Zionism's call for greater and stronger Jewish sovereignty. The move of the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem proved emblematic of this new US-Israel alliance, even as the overwhelming majority of American Jews, and almost all American Jews on the left of the political aisle, cringed. They consider President Trump's domestic and foreign policies antithetical to their Jewish social justice mindset even as nationalist Israeli Jews care less about their expansive rights-based campaigns.

Right-wing and religious Zionists, joined by most of America's Orthodox community, deploy Jewish tradition to back a return of the Jewish people to their ancient homeland. To do God's work, they advocate the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, which are called "Judea and Samaria" to denote their status as a part of God's promised land to the Jews. With scripture as their guide, Jewish settlers seek a restoration of ancient Israel. Democratic understandings of social justice pale in comparison to fulfilling God's mandate for Jews. For them, Judaism's social justice mandate begins with the Jewish people's ability to dwell in their God-given ancient homeland. As these pious Jews reclaim some of the most important sites in all of Judaism and Jewish history, they complicate any political answer to the Israel/Palestine conflict. Their sense of justice does not demand, and for some even opposes, a mandate for Palestinian self-determination. Framed by their read of Jewish text, justice demands nothing more and nothing less than the realization of a reunited ancient Israel under Jewish control.

Conversely, leftist Jews in both the United States and Israel embrace a read on Judaism that demands a rights-based approach to justice that includes the Palestinian cause. Without the strict demands of traditional Judaism, they can adopt a more pragmatic approach to the mid-east conflict, trading land, even historic and sacred Jewish sites, for peace. Within the State of Israel itself, progressive-minded Jews focus their social justice campaigns on ensuring that Arab, Muslim, and Christian citizens of the State of Israel enjoy rights on par with Jewish residents. They back the two-state solution because their sense of justice demands that Israel remain both Jewish and democratic while protecting the right of Palestinians to enjoy national self-

determination. For Jews who have suffered so much for so long under the political sovereignty of unfriendly governments, these leftists argue, the continued Jewish occupation of majority-Palestinian lands proves contrary to their sense of justice.

In the United States as well, the application of politics to religion mirrors the complexity of defining Judaism and the social justice mandates that follow. A quick scan of the American Jewish social justice landscape centers Jewish political activism on the traditional concept of “*tikkun olam*,” repairing the world. Drawn from examples in the ancient text, the Jewish obligation to repair the world enjoys broad currency among contemporary American Jews. For many synagogues and Jewish social justice organizations, *tikkun olam* has become their guiding light. Popular among a wide expanse of American Jews because it links their religious identities to the mandate of fixing a broken world, *tikkun olam* gifts its followers with a nearly seamless alignment of their personal social justice orientations with their larger religious obligations. In a sense, social justice-minded Jews, under the rubric of *tikkun olam*, can count themselves as better Jews merely by acting as they would without Judaism’s mandate to help others. Liberal and progressive American rabbis love this alignment. They can double-down in their sermonizing: fighting for the oppressed inspires otherwise secular Jews to “do Jewish” even if they do not realize they are advancing a religious mandate. Rabbis deliver more people to the pews. Judaism, Americanism, and progressivism align. A *tikkun olam*-centered approach to American Judaism seems to have it all.

Except it does not. As scholar-rabbi-activist Jill Jacobs writes, contemporary Jews have forgotten the textual definitions of *tikkun olam*, reinventing the phrase to conform to larger American liberal ideas rather than rooting it in the language and context of its textual roots. Contemporary Jews who believe they are following a Jewish social justice mandate know nothing about the concept’s earliest mention in the *Mishnah*, nor would they embrace the mystical *kabbalistic* reference to repairing the world that emerged in the medieval period. And, as we learned earlier, if the *tikkun olam* imperative demanded that Jews engage in social justice work, then we would expect the country’s Orthodox Jews, for whom Jewish law governs their day to day lives, to engage in progressive Jewish politics. They do not, distancing themselves from their less-observant co-religionists whose sense of justice demands that they cross religious and racial lines. In effect, each differing type of Jew understands *tikkun olam* through their own lens.⁴

A quick survey of American Jewish history reveals the problems inherent in equating the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam* with broader progressive political mandates. For the most part, Jews engaged in social justice causes tended to emulate the political cultures that surrounded them, drawing parallels to pre-selected pieces of Jewish text to rationalize their beliefs. This quest for inclusion into American society proved so important that it guided the course and direction of Jewish social justice work. In the antebellum period, for example, even northern rabbis offered Bible-based defenses of slavery while southern Jewish congregations claimed Judaism as a defense for its Confederate views. In January 1861, New York Rabbi Morris Raphall offered a “Bible View of Slavery,” concluding that “slaveholding is no sin, and that slave property is expressly placed under the protection of the Ten Commandments.” Just four months later, Shreveport Louisiana’s synagogue published an editorial criticizing a northern Jewish newspaper for its anti-slavery stance. “We mistook your paper for a religious one,” it wrote, “which ought to be strictly neutral in politics.”⁵

In more recent history, the well-known and celebrated alliance between Jews and blacks during the civil rights movement reveals this dynamic as well. When asked to explain the disproportionate Jewish participation in the struggle for racial equality, rabbis and other Jewish leaders tended to advance one of three arguments; history, sociology, or religion. In the case of history, Jews parallel their own to that of African Americans, drawing comparisons between the experience of Jews as slaves in Egypt to slavery in colonial America and the United States. Most often referenced during the yearly Passover *seder* meal, Jews recount their experience as slaves and celebrate their exodus to freedom. With this thinking, Jews marched with blacks during the civil rights movement because they too understood what it meant to be a slave.

Except the history argument does not work. The Jewish experience of slavery in ancient Egypt does not parallel the experience or the legacy of African American slavery in the United States. As one African American leader remarked after attending his Jewish friends' Passover *seder*, "if they tell me they understand the legacy of American slavery because they too were slaves in the land of Egypt, I'll scream!"⁶ Continued racism and white racial supremacy remain a powerful negative force in the lives of African Americans today. Even though slavery ended more than a century ago, its impact has not. The American Jewish experience, on the other hand, moved in the opposite direction. Not only did Jews arrive on American shores with thousands of years' distance from their slavery, but they rose up the social mobility ladder with astonishing speed. Jews earned inclusion in the white middle class by their second generation. The Jewish social justice imperative to join the civil rights movement did not grow from common histories.

A second argument focused on an apparent sociological parallel between blacks and Jews. In this telling of Jewish social justice, a strong affinity existed between blacks and Jews because each understood what it felt to be marginalized by the larger white society. While that approach may have been true for American Jews in the early decades of the twentieth century when they had not yet joined the white middle class, Jewish participation in the civil rights struggle did not occur until anti-Semitism, which reached a peak in the 1920 and 1930s, retreated in the 1950s and beyond. As historian Eric Goldstein has observed, American Jews did not enter into a coalition with blacks until they achieved whiteness. While some Jewish leaders aided blacks in the early part of the twentieth century, a broad inter-racial movement could not emerge until Jews left the margins of society and enjoyed enough power to extend their hands in solidarity.⁷

Finally, and of greatest interest to clergy, American Jews often point to their religious beliefs as the guiding principle driving them to justice work. Yet, deploying Judaism, the religion of the Jews, as a rationale for social justice involvement unearths inconsistencies among Jews. In the Reform movement, especially, prophetic Judaism took center stage. Rabbis from Judaism's most liberal wing preached the words of Isaiah as the anchor of an activist agenda that followed the Torah precept, "Justice, justice, shall you pursue." More than any other denomination, Reform Jews took the highest profile in racial justice work. Indeed, the Reform movement's Religious Action Center in Washington DC has earned an impressive reputation for its work securing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, as well as other vital pieces of legislation.⁸

Yet, the Reform movement's strong affinity for social justice work demonstrates the weakness of the religion-based argument. During the protest movements of the 1950s and 1960s, for example, Jews showed

an inverse relationship between the level of observance and engagement in the civil rights and other reform movements. That is, the least ritual-minded Jews of the Reform movement placed social justice work at the center while the most ritual-minded Jews of Orthodoxy steered clear of it all. Surveys of Jewish participants in civil rights activism also show that only a very few connected their decision to protest with their Jewish heritage. Though disproportionate in number, Jewish civil rights workers tended to affiliate with secular organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), or the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) rather than their synagogue or the national Reform movement's UAHC (now the Union for Reform Judaism, URJ). The most engaged Jews counted themselves as leftists in either the socialist or communist parties, rejecting organized religion as antithetical to their political approach.⁹

These dynamics came to play in the American South as well, where southern Jews did not hop on the civil rights bandwagon. For them, a common experience of social marginalization in the South pushed the Jews of Dixie farther away from activism. Unlike their northern co-religionists who moved into the white suburban middle class by the 1950s, southern Jews still feared anti-Semitism. Overwhelmingly centered in business and commerce, Jewish shopkeepers faced the threat of boycott from whites if they supported blacks or accusations of racism from blacks if they did not. Incidents of synagogue bombings and the well-known murder of Jewish civil rights workers Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, along with African American James Chaney, reminded southern Jews that southern Jewish activism would prove threatening and costly. The lynching of Leo Frank in 1913 remained within the memories of many southern Jews who move cautiously and often resented northern Jews for upsetting their lives and livelihoods when they ventured into southern-based grassroots civil rights activism.¹⁰

The social justice tensions between northern and southern Jews were best captured by University of Chicago Hillel director rabbi Richard Winograd. During the 1963 annual meeting of the Conservative movement's Rabbinic Assembly, Winograd and a group of civil rights-minded rabbis left the conference early and headed to Birmingham in support of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. On arrival at the Birmingham airport, local Jews protested, urging the rabbis to return home. At a tense moment such as this, one would expect Rabbi Winograd to educate his southern co-religionists on the need for their support. Instead, the Chicago-based rabbi offered understanding, empathy, and compassion. After reflecting that he must have seemed to be either Haman, the villain from the Book of Esther, or Torquemada, the chief Spanish inquisitor from 1492, to southern Jews, Winograd defended his brethren's civil rights recalcitrance. He understood the threats posed to their economic, social, and even physical lives in the South. The northern rabbi knew that he lived a far more privileged life: he would be celebrated as a civil rights hero upon his return to Chicago. He did not think he had the right to place southern Jews in a threatening position. From a moral point of view, he wrote in his diary, "the scales were very even." For Winograd, the most painful aspect of the encounter did not prove to be southern opposition to his civil rights strategies. Rather, it was the division, over political differences, of the American Jewish community itself. Winograd pained "over the circumstances that led to pitting Jew against Jew." Even as his definition of Judaism demanded civil rights activism, he extended compassion to Jews whose understanding of Jewish social justice did not.¹¹

A decade later, new understandings of "who is a Jew" continued to animate Jewish social justice work

when a Jewish ethnic and religious revival swept across the American landscape. During the civil rights struggle of the 1950s and early 1960s, American Jews sought integration into the larger white Christian communities around them. For them, Jewishness meant reaching across religious lines. Their approach to social justice work aligned with this assimilationist mindset. Consensus reigned. If the definition of “who is a Jew” meant raising Jewish children in Christian neighborhoods, then their involvement in the civil rights movement would align with the political culture surrounding them. Just as southern Jews during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries defined Jewishness in a way that informed their political views on slavery, post-war suburban Jews redefined their Jewishness, and their resulting social action, to fit the time and place.

Beginning in the mid-1960s, American Jews turned inward, shifting their social justice work to Jewish-centered movements aimed at strengthening Jewish identity. They seemed to follow the three-generation model of acculturation devised by University of Chicago sociologist Marcus Lee Hansen: immigrants do all they can to integrate their children into American life only to watch as their grandchildren, sensing a loss of their heritage, reclaim their grandparent’s religious and ethnic traditions in an effort to reclaim their ancestry. For Jews of the mid-1960s and beyond, “who is a Jew” meant religious self-reflection and discovery. That new awareness translated into social justice work laser -focused on the particular needs of Jews rather than the universal hopes of other Americans.¹²

Among young Jews especially, this period witnessed an unprecedented religious revival. College-age Jewish students, hardly aware of Judaism in their suburban youth, discovered their faith. They learned about the laws of *kashruth*, keeping kosher, and decided that they could lead a more meaningful life if they thought about the food they ate. For some, their increased level of ritual observance made visits home a challenge: they refused to eat the unkosher food their parents prepared. Embracing Jewish ritual observance, many Jews in this era bought *The Jewish Catalog*; a counter-cultural do it yourself guide for increased Jewish religiosity. The second most popular book (after the Bible) released by the Jewish Publication Society in this period, *The Jewish Catalog* and its two sequels offered a Jewish spin on *The Whole Earth Catalog*. In chapter after chapter, Jews raised in assimilationist times could learn how to braid their own *challah* (Sabbath bread), knit their own *kipah*, or create their own *tallit* (prayer shawl). Across the country, parents offered their children Biblical Jewish names, identifying them in public as Jews in a break from their parent’s generation of post-war Jewish moms and dads who sought the most assimilationist-minded names possible.¹³

Inward-turning Jews also sought deeper and more intensive Jewish learning. What was in the 1950s a limited synagogue-based education program on Sunday mornings turned into fully-immersive Jewish day school educations that guided students through the rhythms of the Jewish calendar as their foundation to day-to-day Jewish living. Once the exclusive purview of the nation’s Orthodox community, Jewish day schools grew in both the Conservative and Reform movements, enjoying added growth among suburban Jews fleeing court-ordered integration of public schools. In 1940, only seven American Jewish communities counted Jewish Day Schools. That number grew to 117 in 1965 and 425 just ten years later when over 82,000 Jewish children attended. A 1967 survey noted that non-Orthodox Jewish day schools accounted for almost 80% of the national total.¹⁴

The ethnic and religious revival during the 1960s translated into what most American Jews considered

a new Judeo-centered direction for social justice causes. In perhaps the best-known Jewish social justice efforts of the period, American Jews organized a movement to save Soviet Jews. Led by young people with training in the American South aiding African Americans, the Soviet Jewry movement rallied American Jews from across the denominational spectrum, including the Orthodox. Whether in the halls of the U.S. Senate advocating for government support against the Communist superpower or in the streets during 10,000-strong public demonstrations, renewed and reinvigorated Jewish activists translated their social justice mission from African Americans in the South to Jews in the Soviet Union. Their message to Moscow: Let My People Go. In this identity-politics era, to be a Jew demanded particularist approaches to social justice.

American Jewish support for the Zionist movement surged in this period as well. In June 1967, the State of Israel launched a pre-emptive attack on multiple Arab armies when it became clear that war would be inevitable. In less than a week, the Jewish state gained control of the Golan Heights in the North, the Sinai desert in the South, and, most importantly, east Jerusalem that included the Old City, the Western Wall, and the Temple Mount. When news of the Israeli victory broke, young American Jews added Jewish nationalism to their definition of “who is a Jew” and leveraged their newfound affection for the Jewish state into a more public and less apologetic embrace of Zionism.

In a reaction that surprised even the nation’s organized Jewish leadership, American Jews more than doubled their giving to the Jewish state in the year after the war. 1,000 Jewish college students called their mothers asking for their passports so they could fly to Israel and help the cause. Universities across the country opened junior-year abroad study programs in Israeli universities so that young American Jews could explore their newfound nationalist identities. Between 1967 and 1980, the overwhelming majority of American Jewish immigrants to Israel counted themselves on the progressive left of the political-social justice spectrum. For them, realizing their sense of Jewish nationalism and returning to live in the Jewish homeland reflected a new understanding of what it meant to be a Jew. It was a perspective that embraced identity politics just as it rejected the Jewish community’s historic affinity for maintaining a strict separation between church and state. For these American Zionists, the category “Jewish” would apply to both religion AND nation.¹⁵

On the surface, the American Jewish turn inward that began in the mid-1960s presented as a religious and ethnic revival. Social justice causes appeared less secular and more Jewish. Jews rooted their sense of activism in an expanding definition of Jewishness and deepening respect for tradition. In both the academic writing devoted to this era as well as the historical memory of its participants, this Jewish rebirth seemed a testament to a strengthened American Jewish community. Jewish pride skyrocketed in a population that just a generation earlier preferred quiet, assimilationist and consensus-based lives.

A closer examination of this period reveals a different story. The social justice shift from inter-group to Jewish-centered movements followed the larger social trends of the decade. When identity politics grew in the mid-1960s, many ethnic/racial/religious groups organized their own returns to their roots. African Americans created the Black Power movement. Latinos launched a student group, Mecha. Indigenous peoples formed the American Indian Movement that showed its inner-directed activism by taking control of Alcatraz Island in the late 1960s. In the early 1970s, second-wave feminists created the National Organization for Women.

Jews became more Jewish, as it were, because blacks became more black. Even though Jews presented a more tradition-based public face during this revival, they were merely adopting the nation's larger move to identity politics. Only in the political culture of the 1960s, when so many ethnic, racial, gender, and even religious groups sought a more public and more activist stance could Jews return to their own tradition. Only when secular trends encouraged more religiosity would Jews hop on the bandwagon. In a sense, the Jewish religious revival proved a secularist enterprise: Black Power's broadening of acceptable ethnic-group expression paved the road to Jewish revivalism.¹⁶

In what seems on the surface an irony, the rise of Jewish religious and ethnic politics in the mid-1960s emulated the assimilationist posture of early post-war suburban Jews. In each decade, Jews looked to the political culture around them and followed it. In the 1950s, that meant accommodating to Christian-based neighborhoods. When, for example, a leading national Jewish organization protested against a public school principal that required Jewish children to sing Christmas carols, Jewish parents objected. They wanted their children to fully integrate into their new communities, even if that meant proclaiming Jesus to be the Messiah in song. In the 1960s, American Jews followed larger trends once again, shadowing activist movements as they designed for themselves a Jewish version of group-based advocacy.¹⁷

Instead of marching for blacks in Selma, they rallied for Jews in Kiev. Instead of fighting for strong public schools as a mainstay of Jewish values and American Jewish life, they removed their children, especially in districts with court-ordered integration plans, and formed non-Orthodox Jewish day schools. When the Jewish state achieved a dramatic military victory in 1967, American Jews offered public support that outdid even Israel's very creation in 1948. Despite their outward Jewish appearance, these efforts reflected a changing definition of "who is a Jew" amidst a larger secular political culture that encouraged their Jewish turn inward. In short, were it not for the rise of Black Power, the Jewish revival would not have occurred. In their Jewishness, Jews showed American-ness. Religiosity revealed secularism.

In the contemporary period, Jews of color offer an important perspective on questions of who is a Jew and its impact on Jewish social justice. Recent demographic surveys of American Jews report that 20% self-identify as ethnically diverse.¹⁸ The 2018 San Francisco Bay Area Jewish community survey noted that for respondents aged 18-34, an astonishing 38% of family households counted at least one person of color.¹⁹ As Ilana Kaufman reflected in a recent Eli talk, "Racism in the Jewish Community: The Uncomfortable Truth," Jews of color will become a larger and larger portion of American Jewry, even as Jewish communal organizations and institutions still frame their work with an assumption of Jewish whiteness.²⁰

An embrace of Jews of color demands the most basic re-evaluation of how we define American Judaism and its implications for justice work. All too often, Jews of color enter synagogues and other Jewish institutions and are not recognized as Jewish. When they present themselves as Jews, a repeatable and predictable pattern of questions follow: How are you Jewish? Were you born Jewish? Did you convert? None of these questions, of course, are ever asked of white Jews, perpetuating white racial supremacy in the synagogue, alienating Jews of color from organized Jewish life, and forcing white Jews to reflect upon how racism alienates their own co-religionists from the organized Jewish community. Most recently, an African American Jew carrying a Torah scroll down a street in Brooklyn, New York in November 2018 faced an angry mob of white Jews seeking to recover what they assumed was a stolen Jewish text.²¹

Jews of color challenge our typical understandings of Jewish social justice work. Until now, almost all research and writing completed on the history of Jews and the civil rights movement, my own included, focus on the relationship between blacks and white Jews. What if a Jew was also black? What if there was no black-Jewish relationship because that person was one and the same? How would that frame force a rewriting of the entire question of Jewish social justice activism? In the examples shown in this article, I have argued that American Jews adopted religious and ethnic positions consistent with the secular world around them. In these cases, white Jews learned that their Judaism proved more secular and more American than it did religious. Perspectives from Jews of color force a basic re-evaluation in thinking. To what extent, could Jews of color ask, does the definition of Jewishness and its social justice platform reflect the privileges of whiteness and white racial supremacy more than it does Judaism itself?

An example of this new perspective emerged recently when the movement for Black Lives (BLM) issued a 37,000-word manifesto outlining the many challenges faced by African Americans. Yet, when it included several anti-Zionist lines, including the depiction of Israel as “an apartheid state,” most national Jewish organizations condemned the document and the movement for its anti-Jewish bias. Moreover, they demanded the removal of offending lines before agreeing to offer their support. A black cause that harmed the Jewish state their thinking followed could not expect to receive Jewish support. Except, when framed through the lens of African American Jews, no such dichotomy existed. With their response, Jewish leadership expressed white privilege in the name of Judaism. For Black Jews, victimized by systemic racism even though they are also Jewish, the Jewish communal rejection of BLM stung. It reflected a fundamental racist outlook in white Jewish leaders who seemed ready to sacrifice the needs of blacks until they are satisfied that Jewish needs are met without ever stopping to consider that for an increasing number of American Jews, the two are the same.

Over time and place, the very definition of who is a Jew has changed. The social justice imperatives that followed also reflected differing understandings and interpretations of Jewish texts and traditions. Examined separately, this mosaic does not appear to make much sense. Pieced together, though, with an overarching thesis that sees Jewish history, Judaism, and Jewish social justice as reflective of the larger social and political cultures surrounding Jews, we can see a clear consensus emerge: American Jews have been engaged in a dynamic redefinition of themselves, as Jews, as Americans, as whites and people of color, and ultimately as social justice advocates. Looking to the future, we need only look around us to see how different faith communities, ethnic constituencies, and identity groups choose to express themselves in the public square to see what comes next for American Jews.

NOTES

- 1 See for example Jewish community studies located at <https://www.jewishdatabank.org/databank>
- 2 Jewish Virtual Library, “U.S. Presidential Elections: Jewish Voting Record,” American-Israeli Cooperative Exercise, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jewish-voting-record-in-u-s-presidential-elections>
- 3 About 20% of Israeli citizens claim Christian, Muslim, Druze, or Beduin backgrounds.
- 4 Jill Jacobs, *There Shall Be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice Through Jewish Law and Tradition*, (Turner Publishing Company, 2010).
- 5 Gary Zola and Marc Dollinger, *American Jewish History: A Primary Source Reader*, (Brandeis University Press, 2014), 109.
- 6 Conversation with the author.
- 7 Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*, (Princeton University Press, 2007).
- 8 Deuteronomy, 16:20.
- 9 See for example Marc Dollinger, *Quest for Inclusion: Jews and Liberalism in Modern America*, (Princeton University Press, 2000), especially chapters 6, 7, 8.
- 10 Ibid, especially chapter 7.
- 11 Ibid, 164.
- 12 See for example Marcus Lee Hansen, *The Immigrant in American History*, (Harvard University Press, 1940).
- 13 Richard Siegel, Michael Strassfeld, Sharon Strassfeld, editors, *The First Jewish Catalog: A Do-It-Yourself Kit*, (The Jewish Publication Society, 1965).
- 14 Marc Dollinger, *Black Power, Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s*, (Brandeis University Press, 2018), 121.
- 15 Ibid, 163.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Dollinger, *Quest for Inclusion*, 156.
- 18 Be’Chol Lashon, “Counting Jews,” *GlobalJews.org*, <https://globaljews.org/resources/research/counting-jews>
- 19 “A Portrait of Bay Area Jewish Life and Communities: Community Study Highlights,” The Jewish Community Foundation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties, February 13, 2018, https://jewishfed.org/sites/default/files/BayArea_CommunityStudyHighlights.pdf, 7.
- 20 Ilana Kaufman, “Who Counts?: Race and the Jewish Future,” *ELI Talks: Inspired Jewish Ideas*, August 4, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCtBqbsZPLo&t=2s>

21 Ari Feldman, “Black Jew Swarmed by Hasidic Mob—For Carrying A Torah While Not White, *Forward*, November 16, 2018. <https://forward.com/news/national/414373/black-jew-swarmed-by-hasidic-mob-for-carrying-a-torah-while-not-white/>