

“We were strangers in a strange land”: Jewish Racial Identity and Universalism During the Trump Era

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On August 12th, 2017, over 100 white nationalists gathered in Charlottesville, Virginia at a rally to protest the removal of Confederate monuments and unite far-right extremist groups; the chant “Jews will not replace us” rang throughout the city’s downtown mall as Nazi symbols were displayed. A number of other aggressive white nationalist threats and attacks have occurred in the United States over the past three years, including the Tree of Life massacre, the deadliest antisemitic attack in American history. Over the course of six months, I conducted ethnographic research at a synagogue that had directly experienced white nationalism to examine shifting conceptions of racial identity, attitudes towards ethnic nationalism, and Jewish identity. Drawing on 26 interviews with white-passing congregants and synagogue leaders, I analyze how whiteness is negotiated by members of this Jewish community, some of whom reject whiteness completely, some of whom grapple with the weight of whiteness, and others who are ambivalent towards race in general. I argue that the way race is conceptualized influences the way congregants view white nationalist movements, whether they stand in solidarity with other targeted groups, and how they understand Jewish values and Jewishness as motivating their responses to white nationalism. The majority of interviewees in this congregation feel that their Jewish identity, informed by Jewish values that challenge “whiteness” as a power category, calls them to stand up to white supremacy and resist the oppression of minority groups.

Keywords: nationalism, Jewish, Nazi, whiteness, supremacy, identity

According to the Anti-Defamation League, the rate of antisemitic attacks in this country rose at astounding rates after the 2016 election: 57% from 2016 to 2017.¹² One of the most noteworthy displays of antisemitism occurred in 2017 with the “Unite the Right” rally, when over 200 members of far right extremist groups organized in Charlottesville, Virginia, to protest the removal of Confederate monuments; some white nationalists chanted “Jews will not replace us” and carried flags with Nazi swastikas. The deadliest antisemitic attack in American history, occurred in 2018 at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, where eleven Jews were murdered as they worshipped on Shabbat by a white nationalist with blatantly antisemitic and white nationalist views. The white nationalist gunman believed that the Jews at this synagogue were responsible for the influx of immigrants into the United States. Referencing the Christian New Testament Gospel of John, the gunman called Jews “children of the devil,” and told law enforcement that he believed American Jews were perpetrating the genocide of the white people. This narrative of “white genocide,” referencing the demographic threat white nationalists see

¹ ADL, “Antisemitism in the U.S.,” <https://www.adl.org/what-we-do/anti-semitism/anti-semitism-in-the-us> (December 15, 2019).

² I would like to thank Dr. Geoffrey Claussen for mentoring this project over the course of two years at Elon University and well into my graduate career. This fieldwork would not have been possible without his time and dedication or his investment in student success. This project would also not have been possible without funding and support from Elon University’s Multifaith Scholars program and a summer fellowship from its Center for the Study of Religion, Culture and Society. I am grateful to Dr. Amy Allocco, who directs the Multifaith Scholars program, for her mentorship and unwavering support.

minorities posing to the white population, has been used as a call to arms by prominent white nationalist leaders.³

Following the election of Donald Trump in 2016, white nationalism, in many ways, moved away from the fringe and into mainstream politics. President Trump avoided unequivocal condemnations of white nationalism. After the rally in Charlottesville, he famously condemned the “egregious display of hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides.”⁴ Trump has retweeted memes from alt-right accounts, such as one called “@WhiteGenocideT.” that included numerous racist, antisemitic, misogynist, anti-Arab, and xenophobic tweets. Among them was one that read “get the F—- out of my country” with the location of “Jewmerica.”⁵ Scholar of antisemitism Deborah Lipstadt has argued that Trump’s rhetoric about “global special interests” has built on antisemitic stereotypes of Jews as “internationalists” and greedy “globalist” bankers who take money from the working class.⁶ Additionally, Steven Miller—who is Jewish, yet is known to support white nationalist ideology—served as a senior policy advisor to Donald Trump. After emails exposing Miller’s white nationalist ideology were leaked, 25 Jewish members of congress called on the Trump administration to fire Miller.⁷

This essay focuses on ways in which the rise of white nationalism shaped one southern Jewish community’s conceptions of racial identity and Jewish identity. This community, like a number of other communities throughout America, had had direct encounters with white nationalists in the previous two years. My research draws on interviews with members of one non-Orthodox synagogue in the community. At the request of the synagogue’s leaders and out of respect for the rising threat of antisemitic violence in this country, I am keeping both the location of this synagogue and the names of its members confidential.

In this essay, I argue that congregants’ view of race, and specifically whiteness as a power category, dictated the way they viewed the threat of white nationalism. Those who recognized the historical legacy of whiteness as a privileged category tended to be concerned for the rights of other minoritized and targeted groups. Those who did not see race as a category of social power tended to be less concerned with minority rights, both in Israel and America. I will outline how, especially when primed to think about white privilege, most of my interviewees were inclined to see white nationalism as a real threat and saw their Jewish identity as standing in opposition to white supremacy. In fact, they felt that their Jewish identities, informed by Jewish values that challenge “whiteness” as a power category and oppression of minority groups, called them to stand up to white supremacy. I also argue that white nationalism did not particularly affect this community’s stances or attitudes towards Israel and Jewish nationalism, although those who felt called to oppose white nationalism in America also felt called to stand with minorities in Israel. It is important to note that this project only seeks to analyze the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of

³ David Schraub similarly notes how “white supremacists also tend to portray Whiteness as a threatened, besieged category” and “are concerned to the point of obsession with how they have ‘lost’ these things [power or control].” David Schraub, “White Jews: An Intersectional Approach” in *AJS Review*, 43, no. 2 (2019): 379–407, at 394.

⁴ Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Antisemitism: Here and Now*. (New York: Schocken, 2019) 67.

⁵ Lipstadt, 68.

⁶ Lipstadt, 49–50.

⁷ CNN, “25 Jewish members of Congress call on Trump to fire Stephen Miller over leaked emails” December 15, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/12/20/politics/jewish-members-of-congress-stephen-miller/index.html>

one Jewish community in America; I do not seek to generalize about American Jews as a whole, but rather to provide a narrative about Jews in a specific time and location that has been deeply affected by white nationalism and antisemitism.

This essay examines the thoughts, feelings, and identities of white-presenting American Jews to better understand how a Trumpist America and the subsequent rise in prominence of white nationalists shook conceptions of whiteness for Jews at this synagogue who presented as white. This paper does not examine or interact with any Jews of color—that is not to say that Jews of color are not a prominent minority in America: 12–15% of American Jews identify as non-white.⁸ Had I interviewed and interacted with Jews of color, this may have been a very different project; however, what follows is the story of white-passing Jews in the south and how they grappled with race after coming face to face with white nationalism and antisemitism.

Methods

Over a period of six months, beginning in January of 2019 and ending in August of 2019, I conducted interviews with 26 synagogue members. My interlocutors were all between the ages of 35 and 80, with the exception of one congregant who was 16. I used snowball sampling to find interviewees: interviewees informed me of others who might be interested in participating in interviews. I used a questionnaire for interviews, though interview questions varied somewhat for each congregant.

Thirteen interviewees were female and thirteen were male. Congregants identified as either Reform or Conservative Jews with varying levels of religious observance. Some attended services regularly and others were involved at the Synagogue through alternative communal events, holidays, Sunday school, and Jewish day school. All Jewish congregants interviewed were Ashkenazi Jewish and presented as white. Out of twenty-six interviewees, sixteen identified themselves as liberal or leftist, sometimes using identifiers such as “progressive,” “socialist,” or “Democrat.” Six identified as independent or described their voting for “both Democrats and conservatives.” Four interviewees identified as “conservative” or “Republican.” Pseudonyms are used in this paper to protect the identities of interviewees.

Christianity and White Supremacy

An argument for the relationship between white nationalism and Christianity is not the point of this paper. However, the relationship is relevant in order to understand the ways in which the Jewish encounter with white nationalism was a religious one. The religiosity of hate groups is an understudied phenomenon within the American academy. Kelly Baker, drawing on Robert Orsi’s conceptualization of good/bad religion, argues that the religiosity of hate groups should be taken as a serious subject of academic inquiry. Baker asserts that Christianity (Protestantism) was critical to how the Klan understood themselves and navigated their world and that “neglecting religious commitment ignores a crucial self-identification.”⁹ Protestant Christianity played “an

⁸ Ari Kelman, Aaron Tapper, Izabel Fonesca, Alya Saperstein, “Counting Inconsistencies: An Analysis of American Jewish Population Studies, With a Focus on Jews of Color” *Jews of Color Initiative*, 2019.

⁹ Kelly Baker, *The Gospel of the Klan: the KKK’s Appeal to Protestant America, 1915–1930* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 18.

essential part in the collective identity of the order,” and continues to play a part in contemporary Klan ideology.¹⁰ In a sociological study of the Trump era, Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry have conceptualized the ways in which American Christianity is entangled with white nationalism by putting forth a concept they call White Christian Nationalism. According to Whitehead and Perry, White Christian Nationalism is a “dynamic ideology incorporating a number of beliefs and values” that includes a belief that America was founded as a Christian nation, as well as a belief in “hierarchies among natives and foreigners, whites and nonwhites, men and women heterosexuals and others.”¹¹ Their model demonstrates that Christian identity and Christian themes are entangled with white supremacist rhetoric. Myths about the founding of America as Christian nation are tied to ideas about white racial supremacy. Additionally, Religious Studies scholar Khyati Joshi has connected President Trump’s inability to condemn the white nationalists involved in the Unite the Right rally with broader themes about Christianity and white supremacy. Joshi has argued that “the president’s statements contributed to the normalization of White Christian supremacist rhetoric across the country.”¹² Joshi’s work shows how white Christian nationalist rhetoric seeped into mainstream American political and social consciousness, especially after the election of 2016. Ellen Amster has also connected Christianity with what she calls “Trumpism”: “this white nationalist religious movement rejects pluralistic society, disrupts democratic institutions, and envisions a new political/moral order of the ethnically pure, “cleansed” of corruption by social violence.”¹³ Ultimately, white nationalist groups are historically connected to a tradition of Christian racism, making that identity relevant to my following analysis of what could be called an “interfaith encounter.”

Racial Identity and Prominent of White Nationalist Groups

A significant portion of this research focused on the ways in which racial identity and racial categorization dictated the lens through which my interviewees viewed white nationalism and its relationship or threat to the Jewish and other targeted communities. My perspective is informed by Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s argument that race is a master category in the United States, “a fundamental concept that has profoundly shaped and continues to shape the history, polity, economic structure, and culture of the United States.”¹⁴ Omi and Winant reject claims that race is an essence—that race is inherent in nature and prescribes inherent differences between human beings. They also reject the claim that race is an illusion, a colorblind ideology in which race does not operate as a consequential social category. Omi and Winant assert that viewing race as an illusion has historically been an “ideological tool that capitalists (or sometimes privileged white workers) deployed to prevent the emergence of a united working class movement.”¹⁵ I would suggest that in our present moment, this model has been adapted as a

¹⁰ Baker, 18.

¹¹ Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 7.

¹² Khyati Y. Joshi, *White Christian Privilege: the Illusion of Religious Equality in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 59.

¹³ Ellen Amster. “George Floyd and the ‘American Spring:’ Secular Martyrs, Democratic Uprisings, and the Radical Religion of Trumpist Fascism” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 32, (2021).

¹⁴ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (United States: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 110.

¹⁵ Omi and Winant, 126.

form of “colorblindness” to push against minoritized groups who wish to organize around racial identity in order to fight historical and present realities of institutionalized racism.

Omi and Winant also note the essential aspect of visibility in race, noting that “corporeal distinctions are common; they become essentialized.”¹⁶ However they go on to argue that “once concepts of race are widely known as ‘reality,’ racial difference is not dependent on visual observation alone.”¹⁷ Citing a study that found people who have been blind since birth still “see race through interpersonal and institutional socializations and practices that shape their perception of what race is.”¹⁸ In this way, the visual dimension is crucial to how Americans understand and negotiate race and contributes heavily to the complicated question of whiteness that Jews have faced in the United States. Many of my interlocutors pointed to these issues as they spoke about being “white passing” but also Jewish. They were cognizant that they appeared white and that appearance is a crucial part of racial identity, but interviewees also cited other important facets of racial identity including practicing Judaism.

The categories of race, religion and ethnicity have been at the forefront of scholarly debates over American Jewish identity. As scholar Annalise Glauz-Todrank observes, “the turn to, or neglect of, race in contemporary studies reveals the varying levels of scholarly commitment to thinking through power, privilege, and the role of ‘whiteness’ in Jewish American experiences and in their relations with other groups.”¹⁹ In advancing the argument that race is a master category, I assert that antisemitism, white nationalist movements and American Jewish identity in the age of Trumpian politics cannot be considered without a discussion of power, hierarchy and privilege.²⁰ My interviews demonstrate how a group of Jews considered these issues, often recognizing how power structures shape racial and religious structures in America. Their considerations were often complicated by questions of whether they could be racially Jewish when they appeared “white,” whether white appearance afforded them privileges of whiteness, and whether, as Jews, they were at risk for racially based attacks.²¹

My perspective is also informed by historian Eric Goldstein’s argument that Jewish racial identity in the United States has often been unstable, shaped by shifts in political, economic and social circumstances and, often, a desire by Jews to be viewed as “white.”²² Goldstein outlines the difficulty American Jews have had in navigating their racial identity in America’s white-black binary.²³ He traces the racial transformation of the Jewish community from the late nineteenth

¹⁶ Omi and Winant, 111.

¹⁷ Omi and Winant, 111.

¹⁸ Omi and Winant, 112.

¹⁹ Annalise Glauz-Todrank, “Race, Religion, or Ethnicity? Situating Jews in the American Scene,” in *Religion Compass* 8, no.10 (2014): 304.

²⁰ David Schraub, in an intersectional analysis of whiteness, has similarly noted how “power and hegemony are critical elements in exploring what Whiteness does as a social category.” David Schraub, “White Jews,” 384.

²¹ Schraub also argues that Jews have “conditional whiteness” in that they “do not enjoy it [whiteness] in any way whatsoever when White supremacists are looking for a target to harass.” Schraub, 380.

²² Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

²³ Lisa Tessman has argued that “when Jews identify themselves as white or when others identify Jews as white, there is often an assumption that race is about a binary consisting of black and white.” Lisa Tessmann, “Jewish Racializations: Revealing the Contingency of Whiteness,” in Lisa Tessman and Bat Ami-Bar, *Jewish Locations: Traversing Racialized Landscapes* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2001), 136.

century up to modern day, demonstrating how Jews’ racial identity has been shaped by a journey into whiteness. Goldstein argues that this journey was periodically colored by self-preservation, a desire not to be identified as black and to distance the community from the experience of American blackness, as well as empathy with the plight of the persecuted.²⁴ Goldstein asserts that Jews also faced an internal struggle to maintain Jewish identity while simultaneously escaping the persecution that America delivers to the “Other.” Ultimately, Goldstein argues that as Jews have entered into whiteness, they have sought to maintain their distinct Jewish identity.²⁵

Some of my interviewees were aware of this complicated racial history and recognized that being perceived as white or passing as white in America is a sign of power and privilege. Most interviewees saw their identity as “Jewish” as in tension with their identity as “white,” in that whiteness is a power category and for many centuries, Jewishness has not been.²⁶ These interviewees identified as white but viewed race as very complicated. One interviewee, Dave, noted the complicated nature of Jewish racial identity:

The racial identity is a funny one because...you know, as an American Jew, you get to be white, but you’re also Jewish. So depending on who you’re talking to, a little bit, not white, right? And a little bit not in the club.²⁷

“Not in the club,” here, means outside of Christian mainstream whiteness and outside of all of the privileges whiteness brings.²⁸ At the same time, Dave, who travelled to Charlottesville to participate in the Unite the Right rally as a counter-protester, articulated an acute awareness of his positionality as white passing:

I felt compelled both as a Jewish American and as an American to literally have my body in the streets... I knew that my white privilege facing off against white cops put me at a specifically advantageous space. And then my white privilege facing off against white nationalists, has put me in another space. But then I felt compelled as a Jew to be part of repairing the world... making a statement that I was there both as a Jew and as a white American.²⁹

Dave maintained an acute awareness of his status and privilege as an individual who passes as white, while he also felt that his Jewishness compelled him to act against white nationalism.

Jewish identity, for most interviewees, seemed to conflict with whiteness, as they saw whiteness as a power category rather than as the color of their skin. For many, being Jewish

²⁴ Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, 4–5. It should be noted that Jewish solidarity with Black Americans was the exception rather than the rule.

²⁵ Goldstein, 6. Mark Dollinger, author of *Black Power, Jewish Politics*, notes a similar phenomenon in his discussion of modern black-Jewish alliances.

²⁶ Schraub argues that “whiteness and Jewishness in combination function in ways that are not necessarily grasped if one atomizes the identities and holds them apart.” Schraub, “White Jews,” 382.

²⁷ Interview 6, June 2, 2019.

²⁸ Schraub also sees whiteness as an inappropriate lens for Jews because it “obscures important features of Jewish experience for White and non-White Jews alike, while often accentuating or accelerating antisemitic tropes.” Schraub, “White Jews,” 382.

²⁹ Interview 6, June 2, 2019.

meant not being fully white, and Jewish identity stood at odds with white identity and white nationalism. The interviewees who acknowledged the deeply complicated racial history and racial present in America tended to emphasize the tension between their Jewish and white identities. As one interviewee, Lucas, noted:

I consider myself white. I think, it's a little hard. I say that. And I also think to be Jewish means not being fully white, but I would say that in the same way, I clearly have white privilege and clearly pass and clearly can take advantage of that. And I think in that regard [I] definitely feel white.³⁰

Another woman I interviewed, Molly, expressed similar sentiments by saying that “Jews in the United States are, I think, largely institutionally protected by things like middle class status and whiteness... [but] when you step into a synagogue, you are a target.”³¹ Molly characterizes stepping into synagogue as challenging or changing the status of being white. It is here that Jewish identity is visual and salient.

Many of my interviewees had trouble separating racial Jewish identity, whiteness, and religious/ethnic religious identity.³² When asked about racial identity, many interviewees would question what counts as a race, ethnicity, and how whiteness interacts with these categories. Some did consider Judaism a race while complicating that category, as when Barbara cited the various races of people who practice Judaism and concluded that “I really don't see Judaism as a race, as much as I do a people.”³³ Jolene connected the question to the college questionnaire her daughter was filling out at the time, which included a question about racial identification. Jolene pointed out that “race, there's like four or five things [options]. What if you don't fit into that?”³⁴ Identification with whiteness often came with a caveat, as Martha noted, “well I guess I would have to say Caucasian. When people ask me, how do you identify yourself? I always say Jewish first.”³⁵ I would argue that this difficulty comes from the primacy of the black and white binary in American racial and political history and that categorizing Judaism as religion was partially unsuccessful in removing Jews from a process of racialization. As anthropologist Henry Goldschmidt argues, “‘race’ and ‘religion’ have each helped to define the very nature of the other... They are, I would argue, co-constituted categories, wholly dependent on each other for their social existence and symbolic meanings.”³⁶ This interdependence becomes demonstrably heightened in the face of white nationalism. As one of my interviewees, Noah, told me about his racial identity, “I'm white, I have white privilege, it would be a simple answer four years ago, and

³⁰ Interview 11, June 23, 2019.

³¹ Interview 10, June 16, 2019.

³² Matthew Frye Jacobson would discuss this phenomenon in terms of the difference of “race as a conceptual category and race as a perceptual category.” Jacobson suggests that “antisemitism and the racial odyssey of Jews in the United States are neither wholly divisible from nor wholly dependent upon the history of whiteness and its vicissitudes in American political culture.” Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 172, 173.

³³ Interview 13, June 29, 2019.

³⁴ Interview 15, August 15, 2019.

³⁵ Interview 19, August 18, 2019.

³⁶ Henry Goldschmidt. *Race and Religion Among the Chosen Peoples of Crown Heights*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006) 26.

now I’m like yes I enjoy all the privileges of whiteness, but there’s some kind of sense of provisionality and risk about it.”³⁷

Rejecting Whiteness

While all my interviewees seemed likely to be identified as white—they were “white passing”—a few did not personally identify as white. For example, Sandra explained white nationalism and specifically the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville as changing the way she views her identity:

I was asked recently, I was in a group of people, just a couple weeks ago and I brought up a viewpoint that I hold now as a result of what happened. . . in Charlottesville, I do not view myself as white. I pass, but I am not. I am a Semite; I am not white.³⁸

Sandra, like Dave, recognized that she passes as white but does feel white—in that whiteness symbolizes power and, in many ways, the rise of white nationalism has made many Jews in her community feel a loss of power. For the most part, as Eric Goldstein has observed, “American Jews are by no means on the verge of renouncing their status as white. . . . [Whiteness] is critical to their ongoing desire for success and acceptance in an America defined by race.”³⁹ However, coming face to face with the astoundingly antisemitic and staggeringly hateful views of white nationalists caused a reconsideration of whiteness for a minority of Jews at this synagogue. Sandra at least, had explicitly, “renounced her status as white.”⁴⁰ As Karen Brodtkin argues: Jewishness has been “employed as a contrastive form, to mark reservation, ambivalence, and a limit on the embrace of whiteness.”⁴¹ Many of my liberal interviewees felt that whiteness is as Brodtkin writes, “a worldview that has difficulty envisioning an organization of social life that does not rest upon systematic and institutionalized racial subordination,” and therefore reject, or partially reject the identification of white.⁴²

It is not clear whether we can speak of “Jewish values” leading to these interviewees’ liberal ideas or whether their liberal ideas produced a kind of Jewish-based social justice advocacy. Congregants’ identities and values were more complicated than that and relationality to race was unstable: some interviewees expressed conflicting opinions about the meaning of whiteness within their interviews. Interviewees’ reaction to white nationalism was not dictated on their racial self-identification as “white” or “not white.” These cultural categories were not

³⁷ Lisa Tessman argues for kinds of Jewish racial identifications that recognize that whiteness and race are “moments in a historical process,” because she believes that they advance “liberatory racial politics.” Lisa Tessman, “Jewish Racializations,” 139. Many of my interviewees do recognize the social construction of race; however, some reject racial categories.

³⁸ Interview 3, January 17, 2019.

³⁹ Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*.

⁴⁰ As noted above, Lisa Tessman argues that it is important to note the ways in which Jewish racializations are dynamic. The reconsideration of racial identity is operative here in a minority of interviewees. While Tessman argues against some forms of rejecting whiteness, including what she calls Jewish guilt, because it can draw attention away from other targets of racism, rising white supremacy and antisemitism may indicate a catalyst for shifting racial conceptions and categorizations for Jews that are both tied to concern for other targeted groups and reflection of a shifting historical moment.

⁴¹ Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2010) 185.

⁴² Brodtkin, 185.

sufficient to explain why a Jewish subject may or may not view white nationalism as a significant threat. Experiences with antisemitic acts were also not sufficient to explain their racial identification. Nor was referral to and employment of Jewish values sufficient to predict how one may respond to white nationalism. Several conservative Jews at this synagogue referenced Jewish values as integral to their life and proceeded as if white nationalism was inconsequential. What is important to note about my analysis is not that Democratic Jews tend to be more concerned about white nationalism and Republican Jews less so (although this was true) but that the ability to understand and navigate cultural categories such as American whiteness, without essentializing it, was decisive in the response to white nationalism.⁴³

White Christian Hegemony

On the other hand, in line with Goldshmidt's argument for the inseparability of race and religion, some interviewees may have been uncomfortable identifying as white after experiencing the rise of white nationalism because of white nationalists' association with Christianity. Melanie Kaye Kantrowitz, in *The Color of Jews: Racial Politics and Radical Diasporism*, asserts that whiteness is distinctively Christian, a phenomenon she calls "Christian centrality."⁴⁴ Some interviewees recognized and expressed the ways in which Jewish identity, and its ties with the racial category "white," are sometimes in conflict with Christian hegemony. A rabbi whom I interviewed, Lisa, told me in response to my question on racial identity that when in interfaith clergy groups that she "may look similar to a lot of the clergy, [but] we're very different...theologically."⁴⁵ Lisa's primary racial identity was not white, but Jewish, and she cited the theological difference between herself and other Christians as a primary motivator for that identity. Another interlocutor told me, "Christians have all kinds of privileges over non-Christians in American society... the holy day of Christmas off from work, it's a holiday. Passover's not a holiday, Shabbat is not a holiday. I have to take vacation days to follow my holidays."⁴⁶ While Tim identified as white, he noted some barriers, as he saw them, to fully becoming integrated into whiteness, including religious privileges of Christians.

While some congregants verbalized to me their conflicting identities in relationship to Christian culture, few condemned Christians for white nationalism. Some believed Christians had a responsibility to stop white nationalism, to dissociate it from their religious and moral values, and others acknowledged that Christians would and are making these distinctions. The hesitation to acknowledge hate groups that marched at the rally as Christian, parallels the broader societal

⁴³ Whether or not most of this synagogue's liberal politics are being positioned in terms of Jewish values or their Jewish beliefs informing their liberal politics is unclear. Albert Piette and Matthew Jackson's *What is Existential Anthropology?* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017) is useful to understand the variability of racial categories at work here and what that means for how Jews negotiate racial identity in an increasingly hostile American environment. Existential anthropology, Piette and Jackson argue, is "a reminder that life is irreducible to the terms with which we seek to grasp it," and that "there is a tendency to shift vitality, power, consciousness and will from the transpersonal realms of abstract ideas, global forces, historical processes, genetic patterns, social structures, and discursive formations." Identifying factors such as "conservative" or "liberal" were not sufficient to explain how interviewees orient themselves to white nationalism. Instead, I focus on how congregants understand and use racial categories to navigate the presence of white nationalism.

⁴⁴ Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, *The Colors of Jews: Racial Politics and Radical Diasporism*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 30.

⁴⁵ Interview 5, January 24, 2019.

⁴⁶ Interview 4, January 23, 2019.

separation of hate from Christianity, and was not a product of how congregants saw their own whiteness, or whiteness in general. Congregants tended to employ what scholars including Robert Orsi and Kelly Baker call the distinction between “false” and “true” religion.⁴⁷ One congregant explained to me that white nationalists use Christianity as a sort of legitimation: “I don’t think it [white nationalism] has anything to do with Christianity,” another told me that “it’s a perversion of Christianity” and another that it is “antithetical” to Christianity. Alternatively, Michael Barnett has argued that American Jews have tended towards policies of “integration rather than segregation,” which may account for the broader tendency to refute the connections between Christianity and white nationalism.⁴⁸ It is possible that the broader Jewish tendency to relate to and extend solidarity with other Americans accounts for their hesitancy to link white nationalism and Christianity; however, I would posit that, more likely, Jews at this synagogue have a particular conception of religion. This was informed by their own merging of religious and moral values and what Barnett calls “Prophetic Judaism:” in which Jews are connected to others by “demonstrating their religiosity through humanitarianism.”⁴⁹ In this way, Christians who support white nationalism do not adhere to the model of humanitarianism that Jews at this synagogue largely subscribe to and thus, must not be legitimately religious.

Race as an Illusion

When I asked my interviewees how they defined themselves racially, the key factor in their responses was how they did or did not understand whiteness as a source of power and privilege. Interviewees such as Sandra, Molly, and Dave, who recognized race as “neither essence nor illusion,”⁵⁰ were harrowed by the rising threat of white nationalists, firmly believed that they had a place in combating hate against other minoritized groups (including Muslims and Black Americans), and saw Jewish values as integral to this mission. On the other hand, my conservative-identifying congregants and those who did not view themselves in racial terms saw the threat of white nationalism as exaggerated. Some of them operated inside what Omi and Winant call a “utopian framework.”⁵¹ They saw race as an illusion and as an outdated historical concept. One interviewee, Thomas, told me that he did not identify along racial lines and that race is “something that takes place in the head that doesn’t exist in the natural world.” In talking about racial identity, he noted “that’s a way of looking at the world that is dying out, fortunately.”⁵² Thomas believed that society can transcend race, as long as those who still “hold onto it” can move beyond racial conceptions of themselves and others. Thomas was not only distancing himself from the legacy of whiteness, but also race in general.

When I asked John, one of my politically conservative interviewees, whether he believed white nationalism had gained prominence in the United States, he told me that those on the political left were exaggerating the threat and using “a moniker that is very unappealing and unattractive like ‘white nationalists’. . . to sort of smear” white conservatives who were defending

⁴⁷ Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 2005; Kelly Baker, *The Gospel of the Klan*.

⁴⁸ Michael Barnett, *The Star and Stripes: A History of the Foreign Policies of American Jews*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 10.

⁴⁹ Barnett, 9.

⁵⁰ Omi and Winant, 110.

⁵¹ Omi and Winant, 112.

⁵² Interview 25, 25 August 2019.

their interests.⁵³ He believed that white nationalists are groups of white men who feel disenfranchised and are protecting their own interests, rather than hate groups. He argued that white people, like all racial groups, have the right to organize over the interests of their racial group. While John viewed race as an “illusion,” he also defended white nationalists’ rights to organize around race, because other racial groups have the right to organize around their racial groups’ interests.⁵⁴ John’s views were clearly at odds with the beliefs of most of the members of this congregation.

Universalism as a Response to White Nationalism

Sociologist Steven M. Cohen and other scholars have argued that a major feature of American Jewish identity is “universalism,” a stress on “equal regard and concern for all human beings.”⁵⁵ For example, American Jews tend to focus on fighting all forms of prejudice rather than focusing only on antisemitism. American Jews tend not to see the Holocaust as a unique tragedy but leading to concern for other oppressed groups. Jewish Americans tend to believe that several other minority groups face more discrimination than Jews do, according to Pew Research Center data, and they tend to see their ethical and moral obligations to others as essential to being Jewish.⁵⁶ This commitment to universalist values and moral obligations was common among my interviewees, especially among those who believed that then-President Trump was encouraging white nationalism. These Jews told me that they especially felt called by Jewish values to pursue social justice and stand with other groups who have been targeted by white nationalist groups or by politicians. A number of interviewees told me of their strengthened sense of connectedness to African Americans in particular. “I think it [white nationalism] changed my awareness of the depth of dissatisfaction of the African American community,” Anne told me.⁵⁷ For congregants like these—who may feel white but who viewed race as complicated—white nationalism challenged them to reconsider the experience of being a visible minority in America. Stan, for example, noted how the experience of being confronted with Nazi symbols made him reconsider the meaning of confederate monuments to African Americans:

This whole experience has made me more sensitive and more disturbed by the African American experience in the United States and what my fellow African American citizens endure on a daily basis. It’s made me think about my own attitudes towards these symbols that are at the center of so much of this controversy, Confederate battle flags, statue of Robert E. Lee, statue of Stonewall Jackson, and how these symbols are perceived or must be perceived by a lot of African Americans...It never even occurred to me that these were offensive symbols...I’m a little bit ashamed that I wasn’t more sensitive previously.⁵⁸

⁵³ Interview 25, August 25, 2019.

⁵⁴ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation*, 110.

⁵⁵ Steven Martin Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen. *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000) 103. Also see Charles S. Liebman and Steven M. Cohen, *Two Worlds of Judaism: The Israeli and American Experiences* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) 133–38.

⁵⁶ Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project. *A Portrait of Jewish Americans: Findings from a Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2013.

⁵⁷ Interview 1, January 17, 2019.

⁵⁸ Interview 4, January 24, 2019.

This universalist approach, which seeks solidarity with other oppressed groups, was shared by the majority of congregants as they described their calling to stand up to white nationalism. These congregants emphasized not only standing with the Jewish community but also standing with other minorities who face threats from white nationalists.

Interviewees concerned with white nationalism saw Jewish values as integral to fighting white nationalism and Judaism as inherently oppositional to white nationalism and antisemitism. They were not only sympathetic towards other targeted groups but felt called to action by their Jewish tradition. When I asked, “are there Jewish values that you see as important in fighting hate groups,” many interviewees responded with Jewish values that are indicative of universalism. For example, Tim told me:

I think there’s a Jewish value of loving your neighbor, and your neighbor doesn’t necessarily have the same color skin as you, or the same beliefs as you, or the same sexual orientation or identification as you, but they’re your neighbor, and you’re supposed to love them and all the work that that brings.⁵⁹

For interviewees like Tim, Jewishness was inherently oppositional to white nationalism and Jewish values were integral to their response. The Passover story proved to be a key source for interviewees when asked how Jewish values may be important to fighting white nationalism. Other interviewees, Brian and Noah, also cited the Passover story: “I think there are plenty of Jewish values around helping the stranger and knowing what it’s like to be a slave. And that you are not to oppress...and you have to create peace, you have to pursue justice.”⁶⁰ As Noah told me: “I think there’s a deep social justice tradition in Judaism...part of it is the Passover story. . . that commands us to realize that we were slaves, and that we are supposed to care for the stranger. . . I think it’s really important now more than ever, when these things are under threat.”⁶¹

The disdain for white nationalism as a movement has led many congregants towards action. One interviewee told me that she feels determined to be “more sensitive and be more involved, and make a difference,”⁶² and another told me, “I spend a lot of time in the streets.”⁶³ The value of universalism is blatantly evident among many Jews at this Synagogue and correlated with the ways in which they construct, question, or negotiate their racial identities. In similar ways, most Jews feel as though Jewishness is in some way oppositional to the status of whiteness, a power category in this country and a status associated with Christian hegemony.

On the other hand, those who did not see President Trump’s rhetoric as problematic and those who identify as conservative or independent often saw ignoring white nationalists as the appropriate response. Thomas argued that if protestors had stayed home during the August 12th march, rather than showing up in the streets, white nationalism would have less power as a movement: “My feeling was that if everyone from Charlottesville stayed at home that day, those

⁵⁹ Interview 1, June 23, 2019.

⁶⁰ Interview 12, June 28, 2019.

⁶¹ Interview 8, June 8, 2019.

⁶² Interview 1, January 22, 2019.

⁶³ Interview 10, June 16, 2019.

kids would have marched around the downtown area for about 25 minutes and then go back to live in their mother's basements. . . . They're not prominent, they don't have political power. They're alienated from society."⁶⁴ To Thomas, white nationalism is not a real threat and is best left ignored. Other participants who believe similarly tended to have similar beliefs about race. If they were not concerned about race in general, they tended to not be concerned about white nationalism as a powerful or threatening political movement.

Two very different viewpoints emerged from my questions about the prevalence or threat of white nationalism. The majority of congregants felt called by what they saw as Judaism's social justice values to fight against white nationalism. A few interviewees, however, mostly identifying as conservative, did not see white nationalism as a real threat to the Jewish community or other minorities in this country. Part of their perspective, I argue, stems from the ways in which they viewed race. While those who saw whiteness as associated with power tend to be very concerned with the threat or power of the white nationalist movement, these other interviewees saw little power in whiteness or in white nationalism.

Antisemitism and Universalism

Concern over the rise in antisemitic violence and threats was evident at this synagogue. This concern was in line with national trends: the 2020 Pew Research Center Survey on Jewish Americans, for example, showed that 75% of Jews surveyed reported feeling that there is more antisemitism than there was in 2015.⁶⁵ At the synagogue, this concern for antisemitic violence was met with action: safety measures had increased: a guard was always posted outside of the synagogue. However, despite the rise in white nationalist activity and concern for safety, many congregants situated their experience within the American landscape of prejudice and therefore, viewed it as rather "benign." Several congregants described their stories as "run of the mill antisemitism" or "soft antisemitism." When asked whether he had experienced antisemitism, Ken espoused this narrative of mild antisemitism: "just people saying stupid things in my life. . . no real physical threat. And other than that, some people using what I would call Jewish swears or stupid words."⁶⁶ Another congregant, Tim, similarly answered, "so outside of (the encounter with white nationalists), I think my experiences were kind of you know, run of the mill antisemitic experiences." Tim's description of a "run of the mill antisemitic experience" was "I grew up on Long Island outside of New York city and. . . occasionally you get into the wrong neighborhood and the Italian kids and the Irish kids would call you a k***."⁶⁷ Tim categorized this type of experience as a common one for Jews of his generation. Another congregant, John described this type of antisemitism as "a sort of gentile dislike," or "garden variety." This type of antisemitism is related to what Lipstadt calls the "dinner table antisemite" and the type of antisemitism that was on display in white nationalists demonstrations was clearly experienced differently by congregants. One congregant, Molly, noted that the summer of 2017 changed the way she viewed antisemitism: "the first time I saw antisemitism on display the way it was. . . in marching and chanting of anti-Jewish slogans or the holding of anti-Jewish symbols."⁶⁸ Another congregant

⁶⁴ Interview 25, August 25, 2019.

⁶⁵ Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project.

⁶⁶ Interview 16, June 23, 2019.

⁶⁷ Interview 4, January 23, 2019.

⁶⁸ Interview 2, January 22, 2019.

noted that it was not as much on his radar pre-2016.⁶⁹ I argue that the experiences these congregants had with antisemitism were not downplayed because they did not represent real prejudice, or because they were viewed as unimportant, but because on one hand, rising white nationalist hate brought the experience of the African American community to the fore and on the other, a universalist version of Judaism allowed congregants to situate this antisemitism within the broader landscape of experience with prejudice. Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen have argued, in an ethnographic study on American Jews, that their interviewees “drew universalist lessons from the Holocaust far more than they related to it as a Jewish tragedy with consequences for the survival of the Jewish people.”⁷⁰ This is a sentiment which Eisen and Cohen relate to questions over ethnic distinctiveness, but which I locate in relation to white nationalism. While all congregants experienced antisemitism and were aware of the rise in antisemitic violence after the election of Donald Trump, the tendency to downplay the horrors of antisemitism was, I argue, informed by a strong sense of universalism from most of the congregants at this synagogue. The tendency not to recede into tribalism in the face of white nationalist hate is in line with Michael Barnett’s assertion that “American Jewish tribalism is surprisingly unconcerned with the ebb and flow of antisemitism.”⁷¹

Israel, Jewish Nationalism, Ethnic Nationalism

The construction of racial identity sometimes shaped interviewees’ perceptions and feelings towards Israel. The majority of my interviewees were liberal Zionists—committed to Israel as a Jewish (nationalist) state but also committed to liberal political values. Like most American Jews, they felt attached to Israel, viewing it as a homeland for the Jewish people and an important part of Jewish identity, though were often critical of Israel’s government, especially its treatment of Palestinians.⁷² Dave, for example, described Israel’s state policies as in direct conflict with his Jewish morals: “It [Israel] doesn’t fit and it doesn’t live within the Jewish moral or ethical perspective that I like to live by.” But even interviewees like Dave, who were critical of Israeli policies, were highly engaged with Israel and described it as personally important to them.

How might such engagement with Israel affect responses to white nationalism? One popular theory, developed by New York Times editor Jonathan Weisman in his book (*(Semitism)*): *Being Jewish in the Age of Trump*, is that American Jews are not concerned about white nationalism because of their dedication to Israel.⁷³ One of the central arguments of Weisman’s book is, in fact, that Israel is it distracts Jews from antisemitic threats from the alt-right. Weisman argues that the rise of the alt-right in 2016 was met with almost “criminal indifference” from the American Jewish community, and that fear of losing the American government’s support of Israel led the Jewish community to silence in 2016. Weisman proposes that Israel has taken the attention of American Jews away from faith-based social justice advocacy in the United States and towards Israel.⁷⁴ Contrary to Weisman’s hypothesis, the vast majority of congregants, however, were far from “indifferent;” but felt empowered and emboldened to be catalysts for social change in the face of white nationalism. Furthermore, as noted above, they saw Torah and

⁶⁹ Interview 8, June 8, 2019.

⁷⁰ Michael Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen. *The Jew Within*, 6.

⁷¹ Michael Barnett, *The Star and Stripes*, 10.

⁷² Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project.

⁷³ Jonathan Weisman, (*(Semitism)*): *Being Jewish in America in the Age of Trump*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2018) 79.

⁷⁴ Weisman, 80.

Jewish values as inherently oppositional to white nationalism and crucial in the struggle against it. The majority of Jews at this synagogue felt called to action, a call they felt was informed by Jewish values, and while they felt attached to Israel, it in no way affects their serious unease with the rise of white nationalism in this country. In fact, the solidarity they felt with minorities in the United States often extended to the solidarity they felt with Palestinians in Israel. While more conservative participants were less concerned about white nationalism, this was not because of what Weisman deems “the Israel deception,” but because of what I argue is a limited understanding of race and privilege and the category of “whiteness.”

When I asked congregants directly how they would respond to white nationalists who support Zionism because they see it as compatible with their vision of ethnic nationalism, all except one rejected the comparison. As Sarah put it, Jewish nationalists and white nationalists were “mutually exclusive,” since “the Jewish people have their arms open and are welcoming and inclusive and white nationalism is the opposite.”⁷⁵ Sarah, like almost all of congregants was certain that Jewish identity is universalist, as Eisen and Cohen define it. She saw her model of Jewish identity as incompatible with ethnic nationalism, and she did not view Zionism as ethnic nationalism.

Molly was also the only participant who drew comparisons between the model of ethnic nationalism provided by white nationalists and the model of ethnic nationalism in Israel. When asked how she would respond to white nationalists who see their vision of ethnic nationalism as compatible with Zionism, she answered:

I mean, that’s a really bad, like, it’s bad PR for the state. . . . Zionism makes a claim about the necessity of a sort of Jewish separatism. So it looks bad. . . . Do you make people think more sort of carefully at structurally about what it means to talk about the kind of maintenance of a majoritarian state and how it is you do that?⁷⁶

My other liberal interviewees, by contrast, condemned the state of Israel’s treatment of minorities and saw such treatment as an aberration from true Jewish values. They did not make connections between Jewish nationalism and white nationalism because, for them, Jewish values are always in opposition to the sort of exclusive ethnic nationalism that they saw in white nationalism. Interviewees refuted the connection between white nationalism and Jewish nationalism because they felt that exclusivist policies were not relevant to their Jewish practice or to their view of what Judaism is, does, and should do.

Antisemitism: Israel and Negotiating Power

Jonathan Weisman theorizes a type of antisemitism that paints Jews as “deserving” of hatred, a portrayal which grows in popularity on the far left. Those especially opposed to the state of Israel claim that because Israel is a “colonial, racist state injected into the Middle East by Western powers reeling from guilt over the death of the 6 million,” Jews must “renounce Israel or suffer the consequences that they themselves have brought on.”⁷⁷ This kind of thinking is used as a

⁷⁵ Interview 13, June 29, 2019.

⁷⁶ Interview 10, June 16, 2019.

⁷⁷ Jonathan Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*, 86–87.

justification for antisemitism in that it reasons that because Jews are “oppressors,” they deserve the criticism and contempt from the left and the right. As historian Leonard Dinnerstein has observed, many Jews believe criticism of Israel by non-Jews is merely a “pretense for manifesting antisemitic views.”⁷⁸ Some participants noted this phenomenon when asked about connections between white nationalism and Israel or definitions of antisemitism. As Morgan told me, “if you look at antisemitism across history, it’s a paranoia about Jewish power, this idea that Jews control the world and so now that’s just been placed on Israel.”⁷⁹ Most interviewees’ views towards Israel held strong when asked whether white nationalism has affected their attitudes towards Israel, as Jim told me:

I don’t think it changes anything for me in that respect. I think it neither proves nor disproves the arguments against Zionism or antisemitism. I think those made sense before. Antisemitism is a function of living as a minority population in the diaspora and that’s one of the reasons why Israel felt it was necessary for there to be a place like Israel. That hasn’t changed.⁸⁰

Liberal congregants here felt compelled to negate the conflation of American Jewish identity with Israeli state affairs, as Dave expressed: “Netanyahu doesn’t speak for the American Jewish people. Netanyahu only speaks for a portion of Israeli people and you have no idea what you’re talking about when you’re talking about Netanyahu being a proxy for the lived Jewish experience.”⁸¹

While participants did not see connections between white nationalism and Zionism, some participants did note that antisemitism is very much informed by how the world views Israel, as Sandra noted:

But as someone who is deeply concerned and troubled by events in Israel, and how that is affecting antisemitism globally, or global antisemitism is affecting a global vision of what’s happening in Israel. Jews are taking blame for things that they’re not doing, not saying they are perfect. They are certainly not; they are doing some pretty atrocious things there. . . . I got to see this summer when I spent some time on the West Bank. But, it’s complicated, the history is long.⁸²

Liberal Jews ultimately feel very uncomfortable with the narrative that is told about Jewish Americans, both in relation to racial identity and in their association with Israel. In many ways, Jews have often been required to answer for their whiteness and for the actions and policies of the Israeli government, and my interviewees were uncomfortable with both associations. They tended to reject the attempt to equate Netanyahu’s policies as a surrogate for Jewish American identity. They did not feel that whiteness is a completely appropriate racial identity or that the perceptions of Jewish nationalism or of Israel as “colonial and racist” are appropriate.⁸³ Many of my interviewees sought to highlight their distance from white nationalism not only by

⁷⁸ Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 232.

⁷⁹ Interview 5, January 24, 2019.

⁸⁰ Interview 3, January 23, 2019.

⁸¹ Interview 6, June 2, 2019.

⁸² Interview 2, January 22, 2019.

⁸³ Jonathan Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*, 186.

differentiating Jewishness from whiteness through the expression of Jewish social justice values, but also by strongly differentiating Jewish nationalism from white nationalism. Congregants tended to reject any model in which Jewish nationalism was compared to white nationalism in America.

Marc Lamont Hill and Mitchell Plitnick argue in *Except for Palestine: the Limits of Progressive Politics* that American liberals tend not to apply their progressive mindset to Palestinians.⁸⁴ And while, participants tended not to completely reject Israel as a part of their identity, they did not completely abandon their universalism and concern for the rights of minority groups when it came to the politics of the Israeli state. Most congregants did not ignore the atrocities of the Israeli government towards Palestinians but did tend to highlight the difference between their identities as Jewish and the affinity for Israel and the political policies of the nation of Israel. However, for some interviewees, this affinity overshadowed the extent of the systematic oppression of Palestinians. So why might congregants be critical of the state of Israel yet resist the equation of Jewish nationalism with white nationalism?

I would relate the understandings of the relationship between white nationalism and Jewish nationalism at this synagogue to their understandings of Christianity as not intertwined with white nationalism. In trying to understand why Jewish communities' moral imaginations change over time, Michael Barnett's has observed that "a persistent theme in Jewish theology is the tension between particularism and universalism" and that the American Jewish community is caught in the middle of this antithetical dyad.⁸⁵ Barnett theorizes that "Prophetic Judaism" negotiates these binaries by expressing universalism in terms of particularistic Jewish values.

Congregants overwhelmingly rejected the equation of Jewish nationalism with the form of white nationalism growing in the United States, for three reasons. The first reason I developed from Plitnick and Hill's argument: some congregants believed that Palestinian "freedom must threaten Jewish safety or security," and that "Jewish self-determination must necessarily mean Palestinian dispossession."⁸⁶ The second reason is that, for most congregants, the model of Judaism they ascribe to is not compatible with the model of Jewish Nationalism that they observe in Israel or with white nationalism in America. And the third is that the nature of Jewish nationalism is different than white nationalism: the context and development of the Jewish state as a haven for those who survived the *Shoah* and those attempting to flee antisemitism around the world, is different than the context for which white nationalism developed in the United States (as an inherently exclusive ideology).

Conclusion

The members of this synagogue viewed whiteness as a racial and privilege category in different ways: some rejected whiteness completely; some grappled with the weight of whiteness; and others were ambivalent towards race in general. Scholar Lisa Tessman has discussed two different models for negotiating whiteness, one that recognizes white racial identity and its vulnerability to shifts according to social circumstances, and another that rejects the status of

⁸⁴ Marc Hill and Mitchell Plitnick, *Except for Palestine: the Limits of Progressive Politics*. (New York: New Press, 2021).

⁸⁵ Michael Barnett, *The Star and Stripes*, 7.

⁸⁶ Marc Hill and Mitchell Plitnick, *Except for Palestine*, 13.

whiteness. Tessman views the latter as problematic, because it attempts to associate the person with systemic racism that they are not necessarily subject to. However, I note some cases where rejection of whiteness does not stem from a desire to be associated with persecution, but from tangible and imminent threats from rising American white nationalism. My findings indicate that, for this Jewish community, racial identity and understanding of race have significant implications for responding to extremist groups. They also shed light on narratives about the weight of whiteness in this country and the role that racial identity and identity politics may play in fighting white nationalism moving forward. These findings bring some of the complicated issues concerning nationalism within the Jewish community to the fore, at a time where definitions of antisemitism are contested, and the meaning of American Jewish identity is debated widely among American Jews. Jewish interviewees at this largely liberal synagogue do not seem concerned with defining antisemitism in terms of criticizing Israel, but they worry about Israel’s mistreatment of its minority populations. They are concerned for the rights of minorities in Israel, but do not relate to the plight of Palestinians in the same way as they do to minorities in the United States and for the most part, they think very differently about Jewish nationalism in Israel and white nationalism in the United States. Amidst the rise of antisemitic violence and white nationalist movements, most Jews at this synagogue stand with minorities, break down the dichotomous conceptions of “insider” and “outsider” violence in a move towards solidarity with other targeted communities, and stand in opposition to government officials who are increasingly supportive of white supremacist policies.



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