



How America's Jews Became America's 'New Blacks'

The Jews now face a combination of prejudice and institutional animus that is familiar.

by **David Christopher Kaufman**

Few progressive maxims are more sacrosanct than the idea that African Americans are "incapable of racism." Racism is a specific evil directed at black people; it is particularist, not universal. This philosophy is a by-product of the effort to understand the violent racial unrest that coursed through American cities in the mid-1960s.

In 1968, Lyndon Johnson tasked the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (better known as the Kerner Commission) with identifying the underlying causes of this urban chaos. The conclusion: Foundational white prejudice paired with the might of government institutions such as the military and police forces was responsible for the mayhem. Racism wasn't merely prejudice, a means for certain groups of people to show and act on their bias against certain groups of people different from them. No, racism was the power to transform that prejudice in ways that "affect someone's life physically, economically, educationally, politically or otherwise," as Clyde W. Ford put it in the *Los Angeles Times* last year.

Aided and emboldened by private and public institutions, white people possess this power. And because they do, they could be racist. Black people, who had been long denied the safeguards of favorable police patrols or housing authorities or education departments, could not.

For most of my adult life, I've lived by the belief that African Americans lack the institutional power to commit racism. But as the son of an Ashkenazi Jewish mother and an African-American father, I've always been conscious of the flip side of this idea. It is this: If black people cannot be racist, then, the converse must also apply. *White people cannot experience racism.*

More than 15 months after Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel, the global tide of anti-Semitism has left me with little doubt that this is no longer true, if it ever was. For today, *white people certainly can and do*

experience racism. Or at least, people who have been assigned “whiteness,” let us say. American Jews are considered, and are ethnically categorized as, white in this country.

We are living through a moment when Jews are being chased, pogrom-like, through the streets of Amsterdam, placed on “anti-Zionist” lists preventing them from earning a living, denied the ability to attend university classes at their own schools, and having their homes and businesses menaced and vandalized *simply because they are Jews*—so what else can we call this but racism?

After all, each of these examples is certainly racially motivated. The mostly Muslim mob that sought out fans of Maccabi Tel Aviv after it competed against rival soccer team Ajax last November—they literally put out calls across social media for a “jodenjacht,” or “Jew-hunt.” The riotous nighttime crowd that storm-trooped through the heavily Jewish Brooklyn neighborhood of Marine Park the same month chanting “Free Palestine” and “These are our streets”—that march kicked off at a local synagogue.

In August 2024, an employee at a Brooklyn bookstore banned an author from reading there after determining he was a Zionist Jew (and not much of one at that). The threats against Jewish students at Columbia University this past spring were so vocal and virulent that a campus rabbi advised the students to stay home. He didn’t make such a pronouncement because the students were white or young people. He made it because they were Jews.

As has been the case with African Americans throughout U.S. history, this current moment of anti-Semitism is not merely about bigoted individuals saying or doing bigoted things. It's far more pernicious, systemic, *racist* than that. Aided by laissez-faire organizations—such as impotent police departments—or college administrations that have made the conscious decision not to intervene with those who are actively pursuing Jews, this is prejudice turbocharged via institutional neglect (if not approval) into undeniable racism. The same type of racism that African-American thinkers and activists have long insisted only they can experience.

And so, as they're denied even the most basic civil liberties, such as earning a living or educating their kids, Jews today are inadvertently upending the notion that whites are immune from racism. Jews may still be considered “white” by the federal government's census counters. But when it comes to the dynamics behind race and racism, Jews are emerging as a new kind of oppressed minority.

Anti-Semitic racism does not manifest itself in the same way as other forms of racism, particularly racism against African Americans. Most American Jews, for instance, live with far more economic security than most African Americans: Average household wealth is almost 10 times greater for white Americans than for blacks. Which means Jews are insulated from many of the most immediate consequences of anti-Semitic racism. They can survive income loss from a canceled concert or bookstore ban in ways that most working African Americans could

not if their means of making a living were interfered with due to race. But this doesn't make either the anti-Semitic act or intent any less racist.

Some people question whether Jews are even a race, and indeed, defining race is an incredibly thorny matter. But if "race" refers to a relatively homogeneous people with very distinct genetic ties to one another, the recent trend of chromosomal testing makes it plain that Jews are indeed one—an ancient tribe that has remained apart and has its own identifiable markers. But I have always felt my Jewishness was as "racial" as my blackness. And guess what? I was right. A few years back, when I finally took a 23andMe genetics test, the results didn't read 49.9 percent white or Caucasian—they read 49.9 percent *Ashkenazi Jew*.

Such distinctions are important and meaningful, particularly post-October 7 when claims of Jewish whiteness have been weaponized with unprecedented ferocity by pro-Palestinian protesters. Jews were not victims on October 7, this thinking goes; how could they be, as representatives of "white supremacy" and "privilege"? Jews do, however, enjoy the benefits of economic and social success in the United States, a kind of economic and physical security still out of reach for many blacks.

But possessing the trappings of whiteness does not necessarily equate to whiteness—particularly for a people, like Jews, who existed long before (and beyond) the relatively modern and immensely problematic idea of "race." As someone regularly referred to as a "Jew

of color,” I stand as refutation of the Jews-and-whiteness canard. (So, too, does the population of the Jewish state, which is, as far as skin color goes, almost certainly the most diverse country on earth, from Ethiopians to Yemenis to Iraqis to Salonikans and then on to what is now its Ashkenazi *minority*.) But rather than engage with this conversation, I reframe it. As I wrote in the fall of 2024 in discussing Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *The Message*, open discussion of Jewish whiteness seems to provide an implicit justification for the use of violence:

“Frame Jews as white and not only do they fail to qualify for minority status, they become the causes of #oppression—both real and manufactured—experienced by ‘real’ minorities. Frame Jews as the *causes* of oppression, and they’re expected to atone for it. Demand Jews atone for the suffering of others, and this inevitably leads to recompense and retribution. And retribution against Jews almost inevitably leads to violence and death. Make no mistake: The only motivation behind #jewsarewhite is death—Jewish death.”

This is why, to me at least, whether Jews are “white” doesn’t really matter. As writer Liel Leibovitz noted in this magazine in the summer of 2021, Jews possess “only one identity marker, the only one they ever had, the only one that matters: Jews are Jews.” And this is good enough for me, because it is clearly enough for the anti-Semitic racists who want to see me dead for being a Jew.

There are profound similarities between Jews shut out from their own classrooms by anti-Semitic mobs today and the protests my own black father and aunt endured as they tried to integrate their South Texas schools more than 60 years ago. Both rely on the threat—if not actualization—of violence to prevent learning, a basic American right. And both place the blame squarely on the aggrieved—black kids in the South, Jewish students at the Ivies—for daring to demand access to an equal, attainable education.

There are profound differences as well, of course. Jewish students at Columbia have a wide range of educational alternatives available besides studying at protest-laden campuses. The same could not be said of my father and aunt, who wanted to attend white schools as a response to the farcical separate-but-equal system that defined pre-integration education across America.

But even if Jews *have access* to far more schooling options than civil-rights-era black kids, why should they be compelled to use them? The exact same racism that denied blacks entry into white schools—ethnically motivated and brutally enforced—is being used to shut Jews out of their own classrooms six decades later.

One of the results of my dual heritage is that I've always abhorred compare-and-contrast activism—the type that pits minorities such as blacks and Jews against one another in the futile quest for “most oppressed” status. So much of the current black support for the Palestinian cause, for instance, is framed as one oppressed people

identifying and aligning with another oppressed people—despite the very different ways “oppression” has manifested for each group.

What has come to be called “intersectionality” I instead call “movement-mooching”—social-justice efforts piggybacking upon one another. And I think it’s despicable. But in the case of anti-Semitism, an expanded definition (or at least consideration) of racism that links American Jews with blacks could not be more apt.

Despite the clear economic advantages enjoyed by most American Jews, the consequences of anti-Semitic racism are severe. And one could argue they can, at times, exceed the horrors of the racism experienced by African Americans after the end of slavery. Even at the height of Jim Crow, the goal of segregationists was to keep folks like my father and aunt very separate and very unequal. One way of ensuring that was the threat of violence as a deterrent to social action among black people. Violence and especially lynchings were the means of enforcement. But they were not the objective. The objective was separation and the imposition of inferior status. The same cannot be said for today’s anti-Semitic racists. In their calls of “Globalize the intifada” and “From the river to the sea,” they are clearly calling for Jewish blood. In their case, the elimination of Jews is the objective.

Raise the specter of anti-Semitic racism and you are immediately challenged by those who want to highlight Islamophobia or racism against Arabs. The two are simply not comparable. The response in

America to the radical Islamists' attacks of 9/11 was a culture-wide *defense* of Islam and the rights of Muslims, and great care was taken to ensure they were protected from mobs.

Nearly a quarter century later, those early efforts have become institutionalized and tenured. Unlike Jews today, Arabs and Muslims are not being systematically excluded from cultural events or academic panels, nor are Muslims prevented from entering schools or workplaces by violent protesters taking advantage of their First Amendment protections.

Muslim student groups have not been picketed like the myriad Hillel chapters on campuses across the nation—including, in late November, at Columbia, where protesters demanded Hillel be shut down. And unlike the calls to divest from Israeli companies, there have been few, if any, student-led divestment demands against Arab or Islamic financial and cultural institutions, despite the billions donated over the past decade by Gulf States to universities—and despite the clear role that wealthy nations like Qatar have played in harboring terrorists.

Indeed, the post-October 7 period has seen a *strengthening* of cultural and institutional support for Muslim and Arab causes just as such support has eroded for Jews. Last February's "uncommitted" campaign during Michigan's Democratic primary, for instance, not only resulted in more than 100,000 voters withholding their ballots for President Biden; it placed Arab and Muslim grievances at the center of the entire presidential race in ways that far exceeded Muslim

population numbers. No, racism against so-called Semites (the category was invented by 18th-century German racist thinkers to include Jews as well as Muslims, since Hebrew and Arabic are both considered “Semitic” languages) isn’t about Muslims and Arabs. It’s all about Jews and Israel.

And, of course, Zionism.

Anti-Semites love to explain away their bigotry due to a justified animosity—an animosity not toward Judaism, but toward Israel. If anything, they believe, it is Zionism that is racist—as codified by the UN’s odious General Assembly Resolution 3379 of 1975, which “Determines that Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination.”

Resolution 3379 will mark its 50th anniversary this November, a milestone (despite its revocation in 1991) bound to be exploited by the enemies of Israel to maximum effect—arriving, as it will, so close to the second anniversary of the October 7 massacre. By then—two years into America’s anti-Semitic deluge—both the consequences of anti-Semitic racism and Zionism’s role in its contours will be even more fully defined.

As I think about the ways in which American Jews have become the focus of the nation’s new racist tide, I can’t help thinking about my own sons, who via unexpected twists of genetics are far lighter-skinned than myself. They’re unlikely ever to experience the type of racism I’ve known my entire life—including from Jews. Nor might

they face the risk of violent (if not deadly) police encounters that have led most African-American families to have “the talk” with their children about how to comport themselves around law enforcement.

Perhaps because my mother is white—or maybe because I was just preternaturally obedient as a teen—we never had that conversation in my home, and I’ve managed to reach far into adulthood without ever tussling with the cops. Still, I am certain I will sit down soon with my boys for our own type of “talk.” That talk will not be about how to handle themselves around police officers. Rather it will center on how to emerge unscathed from the equally dangerous encounters that many American Jews will now inevitably endure as they face anti-Semitic racists.

I’m certain I will be among many Jewish parents having such talks with their kids—the first generation of American whites who will begin to understand much of what it feels like to be black. The first generation of American Jews to have unexpectedly become America’s new blacks.

Photo: Stephanie Keith/Getty Images

<https://www.commentary.org/articles/david-christopher-kaufman/jews-americas-new-blacks/>