

My mom is white and my dad is black. Don't call me a 'Jew of Color.'

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The author in front of Washington Square Park (Courtesy of Kylie Unell)

NEW YORK ([JTA](#)) — As a biracial Jew, there is an expectation that I must have something to say in this historic moment. Unlike at any other time in my life, people are treating my opinion as though it deserves a stage, or a glass case for passersby to take in as they walk through a new exhibition on the lives of various Jews of Color.

When I tell people that I do not have much to say about my experience as a “Jew of Color,” I see faces drop just a smidge. I sense that people want to hear about the time I was rejected because of the color of my skin, or when I was sitting in services at a synagogue and somebody came up and asked what inspired a nice non-Jewish girl like me to visit a synagogue, unaware of the fact that I am an observant Jew.

The truth is that nothing like that has ever happened to me, thankfully. There have been moments when a person’s curiosity got the better of them, and they can’t help but probe into the personal details of my life within a minute of meeting me in hopes of figuring out how somebody who looks like me ended up in a Jewish environment. I’ve heard comments like “Is it hard for you to date in the Jewish world because, you know, you’re not the stereotypical Jew?” or “You can’t meet his family yet because you grew up in a broken home and that’s not something that people

in his community are used to” Here’s my personal favorite, which came up while I was living in Israel: “Can you rap for us, you know, like Jay-Z!”

Yes, all of these moments and a few more like them have happened to me, and some of them were painful. But they are not the moments by which I choose to define myself.

My mother is white and my father is black. I have lived as a proud Jew in a variety of Jewish communities, including Kansas, Israel, North Carolina and New York City. Aside from those few standout moments, I have always felt at home in the Jewish world. It is the only world I know and, more than that, it is an expression of all that I am.

The 20th-century German-Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig defines Judaism as a person’s “most impenetrable secret, yet evident in every gesture and every word.” To call myself a Jew of Color would be to ignore that indefinable trait inside of me that is expressed in all that I do and unites me with my fellow Jews throughout the world.

The very term Jews of Color designates a portion of the Jewish population as different from the rest. It is a catchall for those in the Jewish world who look different, whose stories are worn on their bodies.

The idea behind it is not a bad one. It is a term that people can use to feel seen in a world where they can feel unseen — and we know that many people have had the experience of feeling unseen in Jewish settings.

But that hasn’t been my experience — and still, no matter how much I want people to consider me a Jew, when people see me, they label me a Jew of Color. They will do so more now than ever. I want to tell you that calling me a Jew of Color means defining me by negative moments in my life — the moments when my Judaism, and in turn my humanity, is brought into question.

I choose not to define myself by those moments because doing so would mean belittling the far more numerous moments in my life when I have felt a part of the Jewish world at large.

I choose not to walk into a room and call myself a Jew of Color because I refuse to see myself as different from any other Jew. I choose not to overanalyze the fact that my skin is slightly darker than parts of my family or the people in my community. That does not matter. I have no unique traditions because of my skin color. I was born and raised an Ashkenazi Jew, and I plan to do the same thing for my children that my mother did for me — teach them that we are more than any label cast onto us by others or any label we put on ourselves.

The Jewish world is changing, and people who look like me are becoming the face of the “typical Jew” more and more by the day. I beg you to look up Malka Groden, Chavie Bruk, Nissim Black and Yaffy Newman to see just a few examples of where the Jewish world is headed.

Jews of Color is a term that does not signal progress. Instead, it holds us back. It keeps us from seeing what makes every individual Jew unique. We all have a story to share whether we hint to it on our skin or not.

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