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Race in Contemporary Politically Conservative Jewish Thought

In 2017, Eric Cohen and Aylana Meisel, the Executive Director and then Director of Strategic Initiatives at the Tikvah Fund, wrote “Jewish Conservatism: A Manifesto” in *Commentary Magazine*.¹ The piece details the current demographic makeup of the Jewish community in the United States and then outlines a series of challenges facing the community. It lists religious freedom, defense of the family, education, Israel, and antisemitism as areas of particular concern. Next, it argues that Jews must stand up for themselves as part of a larger defense of Western civilization. Finally, it issues a call to action:

The progressive worldview has long since turned against Israel, turned against traditional religion, turned against the very idea of national pride-and so Jews should oppose progressivism itself, even if they identify with certain specific positions within the liberal worldview.²

This quote conveys many of the key themes found in conservative Jewish thought. The piece defines “progressive” as a worldview corresponding to policy stances that, the authors assert, politically conservative Jews reject. Such progressive policies include prioritizing LGBTQ rights over religious freedom, protecting the welfare state, advocating for Israeli territorial concessions to the Palestinians, and more. Cohen and Meisel contend that politically conservative Jews must discard progressive ideas because they represent an opposition to “traditional religion”, American

¹“Jewish Conservatism: A Manifesto,” Ethics & Public Policy Center, Accessed March 7, 2022.

<https://eppc.org/publication/jewish-conservatism-a-manifesto/>.

² Eric Cohen and Aylana Meisel, “Jewish Conservatism a Manifesto,” *Commentary Magazine*, May 2017, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/eric-cohen/jewish-conservatism-manifesto/>.

meritocracy, and the state of Israel. As a result, even Jews who are sympathetic to a particular progressive policy aim should oppose the progressive worldview.

On its surface, Cohen and Meisel's manifesto may not appear to engage with contemporary American racial politics. Indeed, they do not use the word "race" at all in their piece. They similarly do not mention anything about Black Americans. The only mention of white Americans comes when Cohen and Meisel note that a recent Pew survey shows that Orthodox Jews demographically resemble white Evangelical Christians. A deeper examination of conservative Jewish thought over the past decade, however, shows that American racial politics informs this perspective. In particular, my research shows that politically conservative Jews deploy a post-racial politics to at once align themselves with whiteness and deny what they view as a progressive claim that Jews are white.

To examine how politically conservative Jewish thinkers engage with race, I turn to Eric Goldstein's work in *The Price of Whiteness*. Goldstein details a complex history of Jews and race in the United States, examining how American Jews have defined themselves in racial terms in different contexts, as well as how they have related to various racialized groups. In particular, he points to the ambivalent relationship between Jews and whiteness. He writes, "I have chosen not to frame this book as a study of how Jews *became* white, but as one that explores how Jews *negotiated* their place in a complex racial world where Jewishness, whiteness, and blackness have all made significant claims on them".³ I adopt a similar framing, looking at the ways in which politically conservative Jews negotiate their place in a constantly changing American racial context. In so doing, I focus on how and why they both align themselves with and reject whiteness.

³ Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), Pg. 5.

Since Goldstein published *The Price of Whiteness* in 2006, the American racial context has continued to change. In 2008, America elected its first Black president. This moment led some commentators to describe America as post-racial, an idea that deeply influences politically conservative Jewish thought around race.⁴ In 2013, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi founded Black Lives Matter (BLM) and helped organize protests in response to the deaths of African Americans, including Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice.⁵

In 2016, Donald Trump became president, relying on a politics of racial resentment. While his campaign featured many explicitly racialized elements, Trump voters maintained that their support for his policies – including a border wall and a “Muslim Ban” – were not driven by racism.⁶ American Jews debated whether or to what extent Trump was antisemitic and/or supportive of Jewish interests.⁷

In 2020, with the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the police, people again joined mass protests for racial justice. The protests expanded conversations regarding the appropriate role of police in society. There has also been an increased public debate regarding Critical Race Theory (CRT) over the course of the 2010s and into the 2020s.⁸ While CRT is an academic legal discipline, in contemporary conservative parlance the term often refers to any histories or ideas about race in the United States that conservatives consider progressive, and therefore problematic. Finally, the

⁴ Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), Pg. 46.

⁵ “A Brief History of Civil Rights in the United States,” Law Library, Howard University, Accessed February 24, 2022, <https://library.law.howard.edu/civilrightshistory/BLM>.

⁶ Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, Pg. 144.

⁷ David Remnick, “Is Donald Trump an Anti-Semite?” *The New Yorker*, December 21, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/is-donald-trump-an-anti-semite>.

⁸ Jacey Fortin, “Critical Race Theory: A Brief History,” *The New York Times*, November 8, 2021, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-critical-race-theory.html>.

COVID -19 pandemic has once again demonstrated the deep inequities – racial and otherwise – within the United States.

This paper updates Goldstein’s work considering these events. Politically conservative Jews have adapted their language and arguments to meet the contemporary moment. By examining how they discuss BLM, CRT, and religious freedom, I will outline the implications and assumptions of their narratives around race and, more broadly, the place of Jews in contemporary American society. Religious freedom may seem out of place as a site to examine racial politics, but as this paper will show, religion and race have been and remain deeply tied together in discussions of Jewish identity and status.

To examine conservative Jewish perspectives on race, I look at articles in *Commentary Magazine*, *Mosaic Magazine*, and *Mishpacha Magazine*. All three magazines, as discussed in greater detail below, platform conservative Jewish voices. While acknowledging the multiplicity of their viewpoints, I treat them as contributing to a coherent narrative regarding American Jewish life. Though they do not repeat the same arguments, writers tend to agree with each other regarding BLM, CRT, and religious freedom, even directly quoting from each other’s work. I seek to represent that agreement.

For conservative Jewish authors, their project offers communal security. First, it offers physical safety through support for Israel and against antisemitism within the United States. Second, it offers religious continuity through efforts against secularism, both internal and external to the Jewish community. Writers describe secularism as a progressive commitment that threatens to hollow out Jewish identity and, eventually, may endanger the rights of Jews to practice their religion freely in the United States. As a result, politically conservative Jews support an alliance

with white Evangelical Christians to secure the Jewish community from both risks. Ultimately, the conservative project is devoted to maintaining Jewish particularity and continuity.

Before proceeding, it is important to note that between 12 and 15% of the American Jewish community identifies as Jews of Color.⁹ While statistics do not provide a good estimation of the number of Jews of Color historically, the 12-15% range likely indicates growth over time,¹⁰ a trend that will probably continue. Thus, many American Jews today do not pass as white or identify with whiteness in any sense— and conversations about Jews and the racial politics of BLM or CRT often erase this community. Their erasure marks some of the stakes of coding contemporary Jews as white.

This essay will proceed as follows: first, it will give a brief overview of the ways various actors have negotiated Jewish identity. It will highlight the complicated historical relationship between Jews and whiteness from the 1880s until the present day. It will then offer a definition of contemporary politically conservative Judaism and use that definition to argue for *Commentary*, *Mosaic*, and *Mishpacha* as sites to explore this group’s narratives. Next, it describes how conservative Jewish authors understand progressives and progressive Jews. Following this section, the paper will outline two accounts of American Jewish life found within the publications – an “insider” narrative that posits Jews as ideal Americans and an “outsider” narrative that shows their status under threat. The essay then demonstrates how conservative Jewish authors respond to the idea of Jewish whiteness and particularly how a post-racial framing informs their perspectives.

⁹ “Population of Jews of Color Is Increasing in U.S., Despite Undercounting in Population Studies,” Leichtag Foundation, May 16, 2019, <https://leichtag.org/press-release-population-of-jews-of-color-is-increasing-in-u-s-despite-undercounting-in-population-studies/>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Thus, this paper will explore how their narratives affirm the insider status of politically conservative Jews, while enabling them to reject whiteness.

A Brief Overview of Jews, Religion, and Race

Jewish identity does not fit neatly into modern categories of difference. Since the enlightenment various people have described Jewishness as religious, national, racial, ethnic, and/or cultural. Within the American context, racial politics have shaped how Jews understand themselves and how others understand them. American Jews have struggled in their relationship to race, whiteness, and Blackness as the politics and modes of racialization have changed over time. As they have negotiated their identities, American Jews have attempted at once to secure a position within the American mainstream and maintain communal particularity.

Below, I briefly sketch a history of how Jews have navigated the categories of race and religion in North America. First, I will discuss the historical linkages between religion and race. I then outline the attempts to fit Judaism into the category of religion, and the new forms of Jewish identity that such projects produced. Next, I offer an overview of attempts to navigate Jewishness in the context of American racial politics. In so doing, I demonstrate the contingent nature of how American Jews understand their identities in terms of race and religion.

The histories of the categories “race” and “religion” are interwoven. As early as the 15th century, Spanish thinkers developed a concept of “blood purity” to distinguish between new Jewish and Muslim converts to Christianity and the Old Christian population.¹¹ In essence, the theory held that even the descendants of a Jewish or Muslim convert had impure blood – a bodily difference

¹¹ Robert A. Maryks, “Purity of Blood,” Oxford University Press, January 30, 2014, Accessed March 8, 2022, <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195399301/obo-9780195399301-0101.xml>.

that conversion could not erase.¹² As Spain colonized the new world, its colonizers applied the concept of impure blood to Native Americans and enslaved Africans as well.

In the early American context, English common law prohibited the enslavement of Christians.¹³ As missionaries attempted to convert enslaved Africans and Native Americans, settlers developed the category of “race” to explain the continued difference of potential converts and justify their continued oppression. Mirroring the concept of blood purity, “race” became bodily, “religion” became internal. Simultaneously, enslavers argued that the state could not make laws differentiating between religious groups – i.e., it could not outlaw enslaving Christians. Racialization and religion thus informed each other’s development.

Jewish thinkers have navigated the political implications of Jewish difference since arriving in North America. In the colonial period, American Jews frequently identified themselves as a “nation.” Post-independence, such language became untenable as the term “nation” became a way to identify with the newly independent United States.¹⁴ Instead, American Jews began describing their identity in religious terms. Formulating Judaism as a religion allowed Jews to articulate a theory of American citizenship and equality based on the First Amendment’s guarantees of religious freedom. It established Judaism as parallel to Christian minority groups like the Society of Friends.¹⁵ Indeed, “religious freedom talk” allowed Jews to defend their interests while presenting themselves as more loyal to American ideals than those privileging Christianity in the public sphere.¹⁶

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Tisa Joy Wenger, *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), Pg. 8.

¹⁴ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, Pg. 16.

¹⁵ Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History*, Second edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), pg. 29.

¹⁶ Wenger, *Religious Freedom*, Pg. 148.

Post-Independence, American Jews enjoyed significant forms of legal equality, with states gradually granting them full citizenship rights. Non-Jewish Americans described Jews as a race and included them within an imagined family of white races.¹⁷ American Jews by and large did not provoke the racial concerns that African Americans or Irish Americans did.¹⁸ As a result, Jews also used the language of race to describe themselves. This status quo remained largely stable until the 1870s and 1880s.

During the 1870's and 1880's, two intersecting trends complicated American Jewish attempts to navigate the racial and religious discourses within the United States. A large number of immigrants from Eastern Europe brought distinct, secular understandings of Jewish identity. They struggled to articulate a vision of secular Judaism within the predominant religious and racial paradigms.¹⁹ Secular Jews felt that language study and a concept of shared Jewish civilization could maintain communal particularity.²⁰ They believed in voluntary ritual observance and social justice as a core value. Many secular American Jews participated in the labor movement within the United States. Some leaders within the community worried that secular Judaism would prove unsustainable over time.²¹ Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox rabbis all stressed the potential dangers of a religiously indifferent Jewish population, which they felt would not pass on Jewish learning to the succeeding generation.²² The establishment of Judaism as a religion had led to a discomfort with secular forms of Jewishness, which in turn inspired fears around the potential for assimilation into the mainstream.

¹⁷ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, Pg. 18.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Laura Levitt, "Impossible Assimilations, American Liberalism, and Jewish Difference: Revisiting Jewish Secularism," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2007): 807–32, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2007.0062>, Pg. 808.

²⁰ Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism*, pg. 223.

²¹ Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism*, pg. 227.

²² Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism*, pg. 226.

Moreover, with the increase of the Jewish population from 200,000 to over 1,000,000 over the course of a few decades, non-Jewish white Americans began to racialize Jews in new ways.²³ The supposed racial traits of Jews were a mixture of positive and negative stereotypes. Some non-Jews depicted Jews as progressive businessmen, while others viewed them as physically weak, diseased, and cutthroat in business.²⁴ Indeed, films in the late 1890s and early 1900s depicted Jews as arsonists, putting lives at risk to scam insurance companies.²⁵ By the 1920s, members of the Ku Klux Klan asserted that Jews were racially incapable of being full American citizens.²⁶ Negative racial characterizations made some Jews uncomfortable using the language of race to describe their identities.

Still, some American Jews were comfortable using race in this manner. Cyrus Sulzburger, the editor of the *American Hebrew*, believed that persecution had formed Jews into a race.²⁷ He, and others like him, thought that a racialized Jewish identity could provide a stability that other potential definitions of Jewishness lacked.²⁸ By tying Jewishness to biology, leaders sought to make it an inalterable part of a person's being. If Jewishness were only a religion, the argument went, then people might well convert to Christianity for social or other reasons. At the same time, racial language never became a full-fledged ideological commitment; American Jews deployed it ad hoc to meet their communal or emotional needs.²⁹ Adding to this complexity, the assertion that Jews were a separate race did not preclude the claim that Jews were also white or Black.

²³ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, Pg. 36.

²⁴ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, Pg. 37.

²⁵ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, Pg. 39.

²⁶ Wenger, *Religious Freedom*, Pg. 165.

²⁷ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, Pg. 19.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

American Jews and other Americans struggled to define the relationship between Jews, whiteness, and Blackness. In the 1910's, for instance, some non-Jewish commentators drew parallels between Jewish and African American stereotypes, arguing that Jews were Black in a derogatory sense.³⁰ Others grouped Jews and African Americans together as “uncivilized” populations within the United States.³¹ When a white mob murdered Leo Frank, a Jewish man accused of raping and murdering a white girl, commentators drew connections between stereotypes of Jewish and African American men as overly sexual.³²

Other non-Jews sought to identify Jews as white. Thomas Dixon, a white supremacist author, thought that Jews represented civilization.³³ Indeed, one of his books featured a Klansman defending a Jew as a supporter of the Southern way of life. Many Jewish communal leaders also portrayed Jews as white. The American Jewish Committee (AJC), a Jewish civil rights organization, successfully lobbied against a bill that might have categorized Jews as “Asiatics.”³⁴ Leaders continued to contend that Jews were one race in a family of white races.³⁵ Through such arguments, Jews sought to ensure they were part of America's dominant group while still rooting Jewish difference in an unchangeable biology.

Jews also faced increased discrimination in the interwar period. In 1924, Congress passed legislation restricting immigration to the United States based on race and nation of origin, significantly reducing the number of Jewish immigrants.³⁶ There was also an increase in discrimination in the form of quotas on college admissions,³⁷ restrictive covenants that prevented

³⁰ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, Pg. 44.

³¹ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, Pg. 42.

³² Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, Pg. 42-3.

³³ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, Pg. 46.

³⁴ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, Pg. 102-3.

³⁵ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, Pg. 89.

³⁶ Wenger, *Religious Freedom*, Pg. 165.

³⁷ Wenger, *Religious Freedom*, Pg. 166.

Jews from living in certain areas, and other attempts to bar Jews from certain spaces.³⁸ These forms of antisemitism, whether explicitly racialized or not, marked American Jews as outsiders.

The 1940's saw actors defining Jewishness in terms of ethnicity as well as religion,³⁹ a move that helped further ensconce Jews into whiteness along side Irish and Italian Americans.⁴⁰ Knowledge of the Nazi's racial ideology made Jews and other Americans less likely to use explicit racial language when discussing Jewishness,⁴¹ but the category of ethnicity helped maintain a similar sense of biologically rooted difference.⁴² Many legal and social forms of anti-Jewish exclusion began to ease in the late 1940s.⁴³ With their firmer integration into whiteness, many American Jews began to feel more comfortable supporting Black struggles for equality through the civil rights movement.⁴⁴

By the 1960's and 1970's, many Jews understood themselves as integrated into white, middle-class society.⁴⁵ In this context, Black nationalist critiques of American society challenged American Jews. Black activists argued that white society would never accept them as it had Jews.⁴⁶ They further saw Jewish attempts to position themselves as a minority like Black Americans as ignoring the realities of the Black/white color line. James Baldwin, for instance, wrote that Jews had become white in America and critiqued Jews for asking African Americans to wait for justice.⁴⁷ For activists like Baldwin, Jewish attempts to straddle the Black/white divide ignored

³⁸ "Antisemitism Uncovered: Antisemitism in American History," Antisemitism Uncovered, Anti-Defamation League, Accessed March 26, 2022, <https://antisemitism.adl.org/antisemitism-in-american-history/>.

³⁹ Wenger, *Religious Freedom*, Pg. 180.

⁴⁰ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, Pg. 190.

⁴¹ Wenger, *Religious Freedom*, Pg. 145.

⁴² Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, Pg. 203.

⁴³ "Antisemitism Uncovered: Antisemitism in American History."

⁴⁴ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, Pg. 194.

⁴⁵ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, Pg. 212.

⁴⁶ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, Pg. 213.

⁴⁷ James Baldwin, "Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White," *The New York Times*, April 9, 1967, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-antsem.html>.

Jewish access to the benefits of whiteness.⁴⁸ Such arguments put increased strain on Jewish actors, who both wanted to maintain a sense of minority status and their access to white privilege.

Goldstein argues that by the 2000's Jews felt increasingly uncomfortable with their sense of privilege. Having access to whiteness delegitimized Jewish claims to difference. At the same time, he notes that "American Jews are by no means on the verge of renouncing their status as white."⁴⁹

Over the course of more than three centuries, Jews have struggled to navigate America's racial and religious discourses in order both to preserve their particularity and to gain access to social privilege. These tensions are not the result of a real Jewishness that contemporary categories fail to capture, but the contingent products of actors attempting to negotiate their identities.⁵⁰ Whether thinking in terms of race or religion, Jews have engaged with a tension between acceptance into the mainstream of American life and assimilation into it. Ambiguities and tensions continue to plague Jews as they attempt to navigate America's racial discourses today.

Ben Shapiro, not Solomon Schechter: Defining Conservative Judaism

I will now turn to defining politically conservative Judaism. Below, I offer three intersecting definitions. First, I outline Corey Robin's definition of conservatism in general. I then demonstrate how that framework applies to Healan Gaston's concept of anti-secularism as a core concern of politically conservatives Americans, including American Jews. Finally, I place their theories into conversation with the definition that Cohen and Meisel provide in their conservative Jewish manifesto. I next briefly outline some of the polling data available on politically conservative Jews to give a sense of the community's size. Finally, I use these definitions and polling data to show

⁴⁸ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, Pg. 218.

⁴⁹ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, Pg. 238.

⁵⁰ Henry Goldschmidt, *Race and Religion among the Chosen Peoples of Crown Heights* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006) Pg. 9.

that *Commentary*, *Mosaic*, and *Mishpacha Magazine* are reasonable sites to examine conservative Jewish narratives.

The conservative project I examine below is distinct from that of Conservative Judaism, a denominational movement. Arnold Eisen, the current Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, a key Conservative Jewish institution, describes the movement as “the commitment to substantial continuity to our tradition’s beliefs and practices, achieved in part by careful and loving change to meet new circumstances.”⁵¹ The “conservative” nature of the denominational movement is its attempt to maintain continuity even while adapting to modernity.

The politically conservative Jews examined here are also deeply concerned with preserving Judaism. The political actors, however, look to the public square to preserve Jewish identity – a defense of Israel, advocacy against secularism, and the like. For the denominational movement, conserving Judaism was and is primarily a matter of adapting halacha and internal community structures to remain authentic and cultivate engaged members. Though similar in some respects, and though some Conservative Jews are conservative, the two movements are distinct.

In *The Reactionary Mind*, Robin defines conservatism as an opposition to “the liberation of men and women from the fetters of their superiors, particularly in the private sphere” because such a world would lack the “excellence” of a world in which the powerful rule.⁵² In other words, conservatism is interested in maintaining public and private hierarchy, with a particular emphasis on the latter. Obeying a superior – whether an employer, a father, or a heroic leader – is crucial, otherwise the world will become “ugly, brutish, base, and dull.”⁵³ Conservative perspectives posit

⁵¹ “Conservative Judaism,” About, Jewish Theological Seminary, Accessed March 25, 2022, <http://www.jtsa.edu/conservative-judaism/>.

⁵² Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), Pg. 16.

⁵³ Ibid.

that some people are more fit to rule than others and attempts to change that reality are perilous.⁵⁴ Those who bring excellence into the world – defined as economic profit, military domination, intellectual brilliance or something else – have an inherent right to rule it. Attempting to dismantle hierarchies, as many progressive projects do, is both immoral and destroys excellence in the world. American Jews, like many other Americans, have engaged in projects to uphold public and private hierarchies. Without supposing a clear genealogical through line, parts of the Jewish community have supported conservative projects since before the founding of the American republic.⁵⁵ Such projects have included opposing the American revolution, abolition, or other liberatory projects.⁵⁶ Robin’s lens helps account for the policy positions of conservative Jews over time by focusing on hierarchy. Below, I argue that their attempts to preserve hierarchy are rooted, at least in part, in a belief that particular hierarchies support Jewish communal security.

Since the 1950’s, conservative Jews have supported aspects of a Judeo-Christian exceptionalist project – namely, an attempt to secure a place for Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism in American public life as opposed to a public secularism.⁵⁷ Judeo-Christian exceptionalists, including Jews like Will Herberg, believed that democracy was founded on religious, specifically Judeo-Christian, principles.⁵⁸ To be an authentic American, one had to be authentically religious – a particular type of Protestant, Catholic, or Jew. Only a democracy with an appropriately religious citizenry could protect itself from totalitarianism. Judeo-Christian pluralists disputed the exceptionalist understanding. They viewed secularism as the cornerstone to democracy, a necessity

⁵⁴ Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*, Pg. 18.

⁵⁵ Jonathan D. Sarna, “American Jewish Political Conservatism in Historical Perspective,” *American Jewish History* 87, no. 2 (1999): 113–22. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ajh.1999.0021>. Pg. 121.

⁵⁶ Sarna “American Jewish,” Pg. 116.

⁵⁷ K. Healan Gaston, *Imagining Judeo-Christian America: Religion, Secularism, and the Redefinition of Democracy* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), Pg. 11-12.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

to ensure the well-ordered public square. For them, secularism was a neutral means of separating religion and the state, placing members of all religions on equal civic footing. Actors within the Jewish community have used language inflected with both stances and continue to do so today.

As early as the 1950s, some Orthodox rabbis dissented from the broader communal consensus against public school prayer. After *Engle v. Vitale*, a court case that established the unconstitutionality of school officials requiring nondenominational prayer,⁵⁹ Orthodox Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovitz spoke of his “dismay at the alliance between teachers of Judaism and the spokesmen of secularism and atheism.”⁶⁰ Similarly, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, said, “it is necessary to engrave upon the child’s mind the idea that any wrongdoing is an offense against the divine authority and order.”⁶¹ The rabbis’ statements came at a time when elements of the Orthodox coalition were beginning to support public displays of religion as well as supporting public funding for parochial schools.⁶² Thus, elements of the Orthodox world supported anti-secularist projects in the 1950s.

In the 1970’s, Judeo-Christian exceptionalists came to associate LGBTQ rights and reproductive rights, among others, with the growth of secularism.⁶³ Gaston notes that Judeo-Christian exceptionalists asserted “a direct connection between personal morality and the survival of the nation.”⁶⁴ They developed a concept of “secular humanism” – to them, an ideology that attacked the idea of morality itself. The argument that secularism eroded morality was hardly new,⁶⁵ but

⁵⁹ “Engel v. Vitale, 370 U.S. 421 (1962),” Justia Law, Accessed October 5, 2020.

<https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/370/421/>.

⁶⁰ Alan Mittleman, Robert Licht, and Jonathan Sarna, eds. *Jews and the American Public Square: Debating Religion and Republic* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), Pg. 302.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Naomi W. Cohen, *Jews in Christian America: The Pursuit of Religious Equality*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) Pg. 178

⁶³ Gaston, *Imagining Judeo-Christian America*, Pg. 234.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: H. Holt and company, 2005) Pg. 186.

associating secularism with issues of LGBTQ equality, reproductive rights, and other issues proved an effective means of political mobilization for conservatives. As explored below, politically conservative Jews use similar rhetoric today.

Combining both Robin's and Gaston's frameworks, one can see Jewish conservatism as an attempt to maintain an advantageous place for Jews within the contemporary American hierarchy. Although Gaston does not emphasize hierarchies, anti-secularism imagines and sustains them. Anti-secularism privileges the religious over the non-religious. Claiming that the United States is a religious nation marks religious citizens as more authentically American than their non-religious peers. Anti-secularists also pursue the ability for religious actors to legally discriminate against people based on gender or sexual orientation. More broadly they seek to enhance the power of religious employers to hire and fire people that anti-discrimination law would otherwise protect. Both moves advantage religious citizens in terms of discourse and legal power. In the contemporary United States, anti-secularism maintains public religious hierarchies through the legal system.

In "Jewish Conservatism", Cohen and Meisel identify three groups of conservative Jews: "Torah conservatives, Zionist conservatives, and free-market Jewish conservatives."⁶⁶ The category of Torah conservatives, who Cohen and Meisel define as preserving "Torah values," corresponds most strongly to the anti-secularist groups described above.⁶⁷ Robin's framework can similarly account for the conservatism of the Zionist coalition, who they identify as those most committed to Israeli sovereignty. One could argue, for example, that from a conservative perspective Israel earned the right to rule the territories captured during the 1967 War by dint of conquering them.

⁶⁶ Cohen and Meisel, "Jewish Conservatism."

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Finally, the free-market coalition fits directly into Robin's thesis: he argues that empowering employers sustains internal and external hierarchies.⁶⁸

At the same time, politically conservative Jews are not necessarily interested in maintaining hierarchy for hierarchy's sake. They want to further Jewish safety and maintain an authentic form of Judaism. Israel both defends Jewish bodies and fosters such a Judaism. Anti-secularism helps cultivate authentic Judaism in the United States. Similarly, conservative Jewish writers believe that Jews found success in the American economy which can advance both goals as well. For them, conservatism secures a Jewish future.

Though statistics do not exist for the precise definition of politically conservative Judaism outlined above, there is data on how American Jews self identify. Over the past 10 years, approximately two-thirds of the American Jewish community have identified as Democrats, while a fourth has identified as Republicans. A 2020 survey from Pew found that 71% of American Jews were or leaned Democratic, compared to 26% who were or leaned Republican.⁶⁹ A 2013 Pew Survey similarly found that 70% of American Jews were or leaned Democratic, compared to 22% who were or leaned Republican.⁷⁰ In 2020, 50% of American Jews identified as liberal, 32% as moderate, and 16% as conservative, compared to 49% liberal, 29% moderate, and 19% conservative in 2013. The 2020 Pew Survey also estimates the adult Jewish population within the United States at 5.8 million. Thus, between 1 million and 1.5 million American Jews identify as conservative or Republican, respectively.

⁶⁸ Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*, Pg. 16.

⁶⁹ "U.S. Jews' Political Views," Religion & Public Life Project, Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/05/11/u-s-jews-political-views/>.

⁷⁰ "Jewish American's Social and Political Views," Religion & Public Life Project, Pew Research Center, October 1, 2013, <https://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/chapter-6-social-and-political-views/>.

Political affiliation is not evenly distributed within the Jewish community, however. In 2020, 60% of Jews that identified as Orthodox also identified as politically conservative and 75% of Orthodox Jews identified with or leaned towards the Republican Party, matching trends from 2013.⁷¹ Thus, while the overall Jewish community leans liberal and Democratic, the Orthodox Jews tend to identify with conservatism and as Republicans.

Using these definitions, I identified three politically conservative Jewish publications to examine: *Commentary*, *Mosaic*, and *Mishpacha*. The AJC founded *Commentary* in 1945.⁷² The magazine reinvented itself under editor Norman Podhoretz in the 1960s and 1970s.⁷³ Part of *Commentary*'s reinvention included developing and promoting neoconservatism, a conservative ideology that supports free markets and many of the Judeo-Christian exceptionalist positions outlined above.⁷⁴ Today, the magazine does not try to represent a particular segment of the Jewish community. Rather, it presents itself as “the flagship of neoconservatism” on its website.⁷⁵ *Commentary* enjoys a print circulation of 26,000 and averages visits from 800,000 unique users each month.⁷⁶ In this source, I looked at articles geared towards a Jewish audience, rather than engaging with all their work.

Mosaic frames itself as a specifically Jewish magazine – its tag line is “Advancing Jewish Thought.” It also has neoconservative ideological roots. Its sponsor, the Tikvah Fund, identifies as “politically Zionist, economically free-market oriented, culturally traditional, and theologically

⁷¹ “U.S. Jews’ Political Views.”

⁷² “About Us,” About, Commentary Magazine, Accessed December 21, 2021, <https://www.commentary.org/about/>.

⁷³ Nathan Abrams, *Norman Podhoretz and Commentary Magazine: The Rise and Fall of the Neocons* (New York: Continuum, 2010), Kindle.

⁷⁴ “Neoconservatism,” Political Philosophy, Britannica, accessed March 28, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/neoconservatism>; Gaston, *Imagining Judeo-Christian America*, pg. 15.

⁷⁵ “About Us,” Commentary Magazine.

⁷⁶ “Commentary Media Kit 2022,” Commentary Magazine, Accessed March 1, 2022, https://www.commentary.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Media-Kit_2022.pdf.

open-minded.”⁷⁷ Its theological flexibility may reflect the diversity of Jewish identities within the conservative Jewish movement, as Cohen and Meisel (who work for the Tikvah fund) note in their piece. Its editor-in-chief is Jonathan Silver, a senior director at the Tikvah Fund as well. *Mosaic* averages 70,000 unique visitors each month.⁷⁸ It also often samples articles from other Jewish websites – allowing a broader examination of conservative Jewish thought in other contexts.

Mishpacha was founded in 1987 to cater to various streams of Orthodoxy, including Hassidic, Yeshivish, Sephardic, and Modern Orthodox communities.⁷⁹ It started publishing in English in 2004. Though the magazine is based in Israel, its English sections target all Anglo-Orthodox Jews, including those in the United States. Today, there are multiple magazines within its brand, targeted towards different demographics. It has around 250,000 subscribers total, 175,000 of them in North America.⁸⁰ Given the number of subscribers and its branding, *Mishpacha* gives an insight into the concerns of a large segment of the Orthodox community. As shown above, the Orthodox community is the most politically conservative segment of American Judaism. As with *Commentary*, I focus on the articles in *Mishpacha* that discuss current events in terms of their impact on or implications for Jews.

Together, *Commentary*, *Mosaic*, and *Mishpacha* claim to have a little over a million readers each month, either through print or online. This number is high - not every subscriber reads each print addition and not every online visitor reads an article. Similarly, not every subscriber is a politically conservative Jew. There is also likely overlap in readership. Still, a significant percentage of politically conservative American Jews, whose population again is between 1 million and 1.5

⁷⁷ “About Us,” About, Mosaic Magazine, Accessed December 22, 2021, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/about-us/>.

⁷⁸ “Mosaic Media Kit,” About, Mosaic Magazine, Accessed March 1, 2022, https://mosaicmagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Mosaic_MediaKit_10.22.pdf.

⁷⁹ “About Us,” About, Mishpacha Magazine, Accessed March 18, 2022, <https://mishpacha.com/about-us/>.

⁸⁰ “Advertising,” Mishpacha Magazine, Accessed March 18, 2022, <https://mishpacha.com/advertising/>.

million adults, likely read one or more of the publications. Therefore, I take the views found in them as reflecting and advancing a prominent form of conservative Jewish thought.

Imagining Progressives and Progressive Jews

Before analyzing how conservative Jews imagine their place in the United States, this essay will examine how they relate to the rest of the Jewish community and to what they consider the political left. In so doing, it will provide crucial context for understanding their narratives regarding the United States. Politically conservative Jews are aware that they are a minority within the broader Jewish community. They face a puzzle – if the left is so unwelcoming to Jews, why are so many Jews supportive of the left? One of their key replies is that the Jewish majority is secular.

Returning to “Jewish Conservatism,” Cohen and Meisel write, “while a progressive worldview leads many (if not all) Jews beyond Judaism, conservative ideas may offer a natural pathway back toward Jewish commitment.”⁸¹ Cohen and Meisel acknowledge that there are secular Jewish conservatives. At the same time, they chart a connection between conservatism and “Jewish commitment.” They contend that cultivating their conservatism may lead to a deeper relationship with “traditionalist” Jews.⁸² Conversely, progressive ideas will lead many Jews to leave Judaism. The larger number of progressive Jews thus is unimportant in two ways: first, they are not authentically Jewish and second, even if they are, they will not be for long.

Yonoson Rosenblum, a columnist for *Mishpacha*, makes a similar point when he discusses antisemitism. Rosenblum writes that,

[I]f one’s only connection to being Jewish is a Jewish last name, one’s chief fear might be of a neo-Nazi going through the local phone directory in search of Jewish names. But

⁸¹ Cohen and Meisel, “Jewish Conservatism.”

⁸² Ibid.

if one is concerned about the ability to live as an identifiable Jew in the United States and to pass on that identity to one's children, there are far greater reasons to fear.⁸³

Rosenblum creates two types of Jews – those with only a Jewish last name and those who want to live as an “identifiable Jew.” Rosenblum does not state outright who he means to include in the circle of identifiable Jews, but I read him as using yarmulkes and head scarves as proxies for Jewish commitment. The greater threat to Rosenblum's identifiable Jews is not neo-Nazis, but progressive values. He maintains that CRT, among other ideas, will harm (authentic) Jews by empowering antisemites. He argues that the left supports CRT, while the right abjures it. As with Cohen and Maisel above, he associates political differences in the Jewish community with religious authenticity.

Secularism is thus a corrosive internal to the Jewish community. Cohen, Maisel, and Rosenblum imagine Jews without a tie to normative tradition as progressive and as less than authentically Jewish. Progressive Jews are therefore a double threat to the Jewish community. On one hand, they represent a corroded form of Judaism or indeed an end to Judaism; on the other, they fail to support Jewish interests politically.

Politically conservative Jews also define themselves in opposition to all progressives. For them, progressive ideas or policies are constitutive of a totalized worldview. Seth Mandel, the editor of the *Washington Examiner*,⁸⁴ wrote a piece in *Commentary* that provides a good example of this perspective. Mandel writes that intersectionality is becoming a dominant strain of thought on the American left “with anti-Semitism in its DNA.”⁸⁵ His invocation of DNA is meant to convey that

⁸³ Yonoson Rosenblum, “Wokeness Is Coming for Us,” *Mishpacha Magazine*, November 4, 2020, <https://mishpacha.com/wokeeness-is-coming-for-us/>.

⁸⁴ “Seth Mandel, Author at *Commentary Magazine*,” *Commentary Magazine*, accessed March 28, 2022, <https://www.commentary.org/author/seth-mandel/>.

⁸⁵ Seth Mandel, “The Shame of the Anti-Defamation League: How Its New Executive Director Is Betraying the Organization's Purpose,” *Commentary*, November 2018, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/seth-mandel/the-shame-of-the-anti-defamation-league/>.

antisemitism is fundamental to intersectionality and therefore to the American left. Throughout the piece, he uses the terms “liberal”, “left”, “new left”, “socialist” and “progressive” to describe political actors and then argues for a fundamental sameness between them.⁸⁶ He writes, for instance, about “the mainstream Democratic Party’s overt embrace of its left flank”.⁸⁷ He notes two actors that he associates with progressives, only to write that they are ultimately aligned.

Mandel further writes that the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), a Jewish institution that seeks to combat all forms of hate, has “embraced liberalism as a form of religion itself” in opposing religious liberty.⁸⁸ Specifically, he notes that the ADL did not support the Supreme Court ruling in *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*, which favored a Christian baker who had refused to service a same-sex couple’s wedding.⁸⁹ While Mandel uses the term “liberal” here, it is unclear whether he is assigning a specific meaning to the word or is using it as a synecdoche for the left in general. Next, he describes the ADL as embracing liberalism as a religion. In using the term “religion” he is both evoking the secularism versus religion paradigm discussed above and implying that liberalism sustains a totalized worldview unamicable to religion.

Mandel flattens liberal and progressive movements into a singular entity, with a comprehensive worldview. To accept one progressive policy position, whether regarding Israel, the free market, or religious liberty, is to risk becoming part of the whole. For Jews, a progressive identity erases their Judaism. For non-Jews, progressive ideas cultivate antisemitism. If the conservative project fundamentally sustains Judaism and protects Jewish bodies, the left constitutes a coherent

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ “Masterpiece Cakeshop, Ltd. v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission,” Oyez, Accessed March 26, 2022. <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2017/16-111>.

worldview that threatens both. To ground and sustain these critiques, politically conservative Jews develop narratives about the relationship between Jews and the United States. This paper will now turn to exploring these accounts.

Insiders and Outsiders

Conservative Jewish thinkers draw on a number of stories about the past and present in their articles. The narratives they develop provide a sense of how conservative Jewish thinkers understand their place within American society. They can and often do draw on reasonable historical accounts. At the same time, writers highlight or omit specific details to support their political projects. By examining these narratives, I demonstrate that politically conservative Jews position themselves simultaneously as insiders and outsiders in the contemporary United States.

To appropriately represent conservative Jewish perspectives below, I will reproduce their language and their omissions. For example, authors often erase any distinction between criticizing Israel and antisemitism. They also discuss the Jewish community in ways that erase the experiences of Jews of Color. In adopting their language, I am attempting to provide as close an approximation as possible to the authors' views and the manner in which they express them.

In the pages that follow, I first summarize Lauren Kerby's work, *Saving History*, which examines the insider and outsider narratives of white Evangelical Christians. By placing their narratives in conversation, I am not arguing that politically conservative Jews and white Evangelical Christians use the same frameworks. Nor am I arguing that conservative Jews have adopted a Christian perspective. Each communities' accounts differ, based on the historical experiences on which they draw. At the same time, both groups are allied conservative projects in the United States. Some of their accounts share similarities that are worth examining. Taking Kerby's work as a model, I

investigate how politically conservative Jews portray themselves. In particular, I argue that their narratives portray Jews as at once insiders of the real America and outsiders of the American mainstream.

Kerby develops a framework for understanding white Evangelical Protestant narratives regarding the United States. She shows that white Evangelicals depict themselves simultaneously as insiders and outsiders.⁹⁰ Both frames are rooted in real experiences. Moreover, cultivating two positionalities allows them to move between roles and speak with distinct types of authority as the political situation demands. At times, they speak as “founders,” representing normative American values, at other moments they speak as victims demanding equal treatment.⁹¹

The insider and outsider narratives are not clear cut and separate – they overlap and inform each other in their various manifestations.⁹² Kerby writes that in visiting DC, the experiences of white Evangelical Protestant tour groups “validated their understanding of themselves as simultaneously insiders and outsiders.”⁹³ Tourists, for example, understood the objects honoring Christian leaders in DC through both frameworks. When viewed through the insider narrative, such objects are proof of America’s Christian foundations.⁹⁴ When viewing Christian objects through the outsider narrative, often in the same tour, guides would assure their groups that “someone” was going to remove the objects soon.⁹⁵ Evangelicals’ sense of themselves as insiders accentuated the threat of being an outsider.

⁹⁰ Lauren R. Kerby, *Saving History: How White Evangelicals Tour the Nation’s Capital and Redeem a Christian America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), Pg. 14.

⁹¹ Kerby, *Saving History*, Pg. 19.

⁹² Kerby, *Saving History*, Pg. 25.

⁹³ Kerby, *Saving History*, Pg. 22.

⁹⁴ Kerby, *Saving History*, Pg. 23.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

White Evangelicals view themselves as insiders in several ways. They develop a sense of ownership over the United States, of being historically connected to the founders, and a sense that the American system of government is uniquely related to their group. They feel that, “the nation is theirs in every sense: it was founded by Christians like them to be a Christian system of government.”⁹⁶

Politically conservative Jewish writers also rely on an insider narrative with regards to American Jews. Their histories cast Jews as ideal American citizens and Jewish values as a cornerstone of American democracy. Such narratives affirm that Jews have earned a secure place within America.



(Figure One)

Mosaic's 2020 “Year in Review” provides one example of how writers develop the connection between Judaism and America’s founding. Its editors write “Jews, and Christians too, are...sustained by the same ideas and religious patrimony that, centuries ago, inspired America’s puritan fathers.”⁹⁷ An image of pilgrims praying accompanies the piece (Figure One).

⁹⁶ Kerby, *Saving History*, Pg. 51.

⁹⁷ “Mosaic’s Year in Review: Jews, Christians, and the United States,” *Mosaic*, Accessed November 26, 2021, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/observation/politics-current-affairs/2020/12/mosaics-year-in-review-jews-christians-and-the-united-states/>.

Similarly, Josef Joffe, publisher and editor of the German weekly *Die Zeit*,⁹⁸ writes in *Commentary* that, “no Christian-majority nation is as “Jewish” as the United States. Unlike Europe’s Christians, the Puritans returned to the Hebrew Bible, unearthing their faith’s roots in the Torah.”⁹⁹ Both articles draw a continuous line between the religious beliefs of puritans and of American Jews today. By linking puritans and Jews, they locate core American ideas within a shared Jewish and Christian past. They position American Jews as insiders, a part of the same religious genealogy as early Puritans.

Richard Samuelson, an associate professor at California State University, similarly highlights links between American Jewry and George Washington in an article in *Mosaic*.¹⁰⁰ He cites Washington’s letter to the Hebrew congregation of Newport, Rhode Island to support his argument for religious liberty. In the letter, Washington assures the congregation that the newly formed United States would “give to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.”¹⁰¹ For politically conservative Jews, the letter shows that religious freedom, a core American ideal, developed in conversation with the existence and needs of the American Jewish community. Their narratives – whether focusing on the puritans or the founders - locate Jews inside the American tradition. Unlike white Evangelicals, they do not claim ownership or sole responsibility for America. Rather, they position Judaism alongside Christianity as a key part of American history.

The insider framework also manifests in discussions of Jewish entry into the American middle class. Jonathan Tobin writes in *Mosaic* that American Jews, “have thrived because America is a

⁹⁸ “Josef Joffe,” Profiles, Hoover Institution, Accessed March 23, 2022, <https://www.hoover.org/profiles/josef-joffe>.

⁹⁹ Josef Joffe, “American Jews: A Threat Report,” *Commentary Magazine*, September 19, 2021, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/josef-joffe/american-jews-past-present/>.

¹⁰⁰ Richard Samuelson, “Who’s Afraid of Religious Liberty?” *Mosaic Magazine*, August 2016, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/history-ideas/2016/08/whos-afraid-of-religious-liberty/>.

¹⁰¹ Sarna, *American Judaism*, Pg. 39.

place where you are judged as an individual, not solely as a member of a group.”¹⁰² Jews are insiders – they have “thrived” in the United States. Tobin explains this success as the result of an American emphasis on individualism. Here, Jews are at once beneficiaries of the American system and the proof of its merit.

Finally, conservative Jewish writers advance an insider narrative that joins Israel, American Jews, and the United States. Cohen and Meisel, for instance, argue that “to be good Americans, we must be better Jews, and to be better Jews, we must become Zionists.”¹⁰³ Cohen and Meisel contend that Jews become idealized Americans through their commitment to Israel. Being a Zionist Jew, meaning pro-Israel in an expansive sense of the term, is to be a good American.

Both white Evangelical Protestant and conservative Jewish insider narratives exists side by side with outsider narratives. Kerby describes the outsider framework that white Evangelicals have developed. They view themselves as both victims of a hostile secular culture and as exiled from the American public square.¹⁰⁴ Their account posits that the legal conflict around the ability of some businesses to discriminate against certain groups, particularly members of the LGBTQ community, is a sign of an anti-Christian culture.¹⁰⁵ For white Evangelicals, court cases like *Masterpiece Cake Shop v. Colorado Civil Rights Division*, in which an LGBTQ couple sued a Christian baker for refusing to provide a cake for a same-sex wedding,¹⁰⁶ are examples of a broader

¹⁰² Jonathan Tobin, “Dave Chappelle’s Jokes about ‘Space Jews’ May Be in Poor Taste, but That’s No Reason to Jump on the Cancellation Bandwagon,” *Mosaic Magazine*, October 2021, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/picks/arts-culture/2021/10/dave-chappelles-jokes-about-space-jews-may-be-in-poor-taste-but-thats-no-reason-to-jump-on-the-cancellation-band-wagon/>.

¹⁰³ Cohen, and Meisel, “Jewish Conservatism.”

¹⁰⁴ Kerby, *Saving History*, Pg. 5.

¹⁰⁵ Kerby, *Saving History*, Pg. 88.

¹⁰⁶ “Masterpiece Cakeshop, Ltd. v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission,” Oyez, Accessed March 24, 2022, <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2017/16-111>.

secularism that is attacking their community. They claim that secular culture discriminates against them and that they need equal protection under the law.¹⁰⁷

Politically conservative Jews develop similar themes. The communities' senses of victimhood have some similarities, focusing on a hostile secular culture that they believe has taken over the United States. In addition to this narrative, the articles also develop an account of progressive betrayal.

In terming the ideas explored below a "narrative," I am not implying that they are fictitious. Indeed, there is a significant history of Jewish oppression and continued anti-Jewish violence within the United States.¹⁰⁸ Rather, I am using "narrative" to refer to the ways in which people construct data points into a theory of history and the present, and then deploy that theory to support political projects.

Conservative Jews articulate a victimhood narrative with respect to religious liberty. Unlike white Evangelicals, however, they do not focus on current victimization, but on the potential for future discrimination. In one article supporting the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), Bruce Abramson writes that religious freedom is under threat from a hostile secular culture. He does not contend that activists are currently challenging Jewish practices. Instead, he writes that, "there is no way to predict which aspects of Jewish ritual or morality...may soon conflict with governing moral judgements."¹⁰⁹ The dominant secular culture may not yet have disrupted Jewish observance, but without support for RFRA, it could.

¹⁰⁷ Kerby, *Saving History*, Pg. 5-6.

¹⁰⁸ Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Antisemitism: Here and Now*, First ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 2019), Pg. xii.

¹⁰⁹ Bruce Abramson, "The Decline—and Fall? —Of Religious Freedom in America," *Mosaic Magazine*, August 2015, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/politics-current-affairs/2015/08/the-decline-and-fall-of-religious-freedom-in-america/>.

Writers also frame white Evangelicals as the current “front line” in the conflict with secularism. Richard Samuelson, referenced above, writes in *Mosaic* that, “although the secularizing and leveling fires of today’s activists are aimed mainly at Christians, the precedents that are being set would apply no less to Jews.”¹¹⁰ In *Mishpacha*, columnist Eytan Kobre writes that Jews had a stake in the outcome of *Hobby Lobby v. Burwell*, a case that asked whether a closely held for-profit corporation could receive a religious exemption from the contraception mandate of the Affordable Care Act.¹¹¹ Kobre argues that Hobby Lobby “seeks to infuse even the most mundane aspects of life such as engaging in profit-making business with a spiritual essence. This is a quintessentially Jewish concept...”¹¹² Kobre believes that Hobby Lobby, a Christian company, is acting in accordance with a Jewish idea. The government is threatening their right to enact their values, with potential consequences for both Christians and Jews. Kobre draws parallels between the challenges facing white Evangelical Protestants and conservative-cum-Orthodox Jewish communities.

Conservative Jews thus develop a slightly ambivalent outsider narrative. Secularism may or may not threaten them currently, but it will soon. The outsider account also works to support an alliance with white Evangelical Christians, positioning their political project as supporting the interests of Jews.

In addition to outlining the potential for victimization, writers develop an account of progressive betrayal. Their sense of betrayal manifests particularly with regards to progressive critiques of Israel and Black-Jewish relations. Jason Hills writes in *Mosaic*, “[Black Lives Matter’s] anti-Israel

¹¹⁰ Samuelson, “Who’s Afraid.”

¹¹¹ “Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores,” Oyez, Accessed March 24, 2022, <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2013/13-354>.

¹¹² Eytan Kobre, “Off Their Hobbyhorse,” *Mishpacha Magazine*, April 2, 2014, <https://mishpacha.com/off-their-hobbyhorse/>.

stance betrays Jews in America, to whom blacks in this country are enormously indebted.”¹¹³ For Hills, Jewish support for the civil rights movement should have led to Black support for the Jewish state. Black Lives Matter betrays American Jews by critiquing Israel. Jake Wallis Simons and Saul Singer advance similar arguments, featured in *Mosaic* and *Commentary*, respectively.¹¹⁴ Here, the outsider frame supports a sense of alienation from progressive movements.

Such narratives show the need for Jewish political engagement. Insider accounts argue that Jews have gained a lot from the American status quo. They also tie Jewishness to the historical fabric of the American nation. Outsider narratives, however, assert that progressives threaten all these achievements. According to conservative Jews, progressives threaten the (Jewish) value of religious freedom and view the Jewish state as an oppressor.

Thus, Jews are both insiders of the real America and outsiders of the progressive American mainstream. Moreover, the comparison to Evangelicals shows that their two narratives are not solely rooted in the genuine complexities of American Jewish identity. Authors develop both accounts to provide politically useful positions from which to advance their projects. As insiders, they can claim to represent and defend an authentic American tradition. As outsiders, they can portray themselves as righteous victims, unfairly maligned and under threat. The two frameworks are not in tension with each other.¹¹⁵ Rather, they each provide a set of tools to address political issues.

¹¹³ Jason D. Hills, “Black Lives Matter’s Israel Problem,” *Mosaic Magazine*, June 2018,

<https://mosaicmagazine.com/picks/israel-zionism/2018/06/black-lives-matter-has-an-israel-problem/>.

¹¹⁴ Saul Singer, “Remembering the Great African American Leaders Who Were Also Zionists,” *Mosaic Magazine*, July 2020, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/picks/israel-zionism/2020/07/remembering-the-great-african-american-leaders-who-were-also-zionists/>. ; Jake Wallis Simons, “Malcolm X’s Legacy of Anti-Semitism Persists,” *Mosaic Magazine*, February 2021, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/picks/politics-current-affairs/2021/02/malcolm-xs-legacy-of-anti-semitism-persists/>.

¹¹⁵ Kerby, *Saving History*, Pg. 23.

Jews have historically viewed whiteness as a mark of assimilation and insider status. The insider narrative above corresponds to many of the benefits of whiteness – access to security, entry to the middle class, and identification with the American nation. At the same time, politically conservative Jews stridently deny what they view as a progressive claim that Jews are white.

Navigating Whiteness

All three magazines contain articles that argue that progressives view Jews as white and push back against the idea. Politically conservative Jews consistently refute the suggestion that Jews are white, viewing the claim as both inaccurate and as a political attack on the Jewish community. They view whiteness, as progressives use it, as a source of shame or an indication that they are oppressors. Moreover, they assert that calling Jews white is, if not antisemitic itself, a barrier to effective progressive responses to antisemitism. In their arguments, writers utilize a post-racial politics to deny both the idea that Jews have access to white privilege and the idea that Jews might identify as white.

Before analyzing their articles, I want to highlight three points. First, the authors I examined treated the idea that progressives thought Jews were white as a given. They did not examine other progressive arguments on the topic, tending to address the conversation in terms of a white/not white binary. Second, most writers did not mention the existence of Jews of Color. Below, I argue that a post-racial politics and an anxiety that a racial identity will displace Jewishness results in this erasure. Third, they also consistently repudiated the politics of whiteness that white supremacists advance, which excludes Jews from whiteness. I do not deeply engage with their denunciations of supremacist views of whiteness, which the articles tended to emphasize less. Their main concern was with progressive politics, rather than the politics of the far right.

Many of the critiques I found focused on CRT and intersectionality as problematic for Jews. Like CRT, intersectionality here is less a reference to a scholarly framework and more a phrase that refers to progressive ideas about race in general. Framing the conversation around Jews and race in terms of CRT and intersectionality accomplishes two things. It connects their critiques to a broader conservative discourse opposing progressive ideas regarding anti-racism. It also locates these ideas as essential parts of the contemporary progressive project. If intersectionality is a key progressive ideology, then its ties to antisemitism implicate the left as a whole.

By denying that Jewish whiteness, politically conservative Jews reflect a long history of Jewish ambivalence to whiteness. Goldstein points to the benefits of whiteness, material and otherwise, as well as the real costs and tensions that whiteness introduced to the Jewish experience.¹¹⁶ James Baldwin similarly notes in the case of the Irish that whiteness produces both benefits and amnesias.¹¹⁷ At other points in Jewish history, Jews have sought to explicitly identify with whiteness to attain a sense of being American insiders with access to social status, financial security, and other forms of power.¹¹⁸ Goldstein demonstrates the ways in which such an identification was not a free choice, but something the larger, white society pushed Jews towards as a means of maintaining a particular vision of their national culture and securing the color line.¹¹⁹ Thus, Jews have identified as white both in reaction to outside pressures and in response to the benefits of identifying as such. At the same time, Jews have struggled with conflicting desires for integration into a white mainstream and for communal distinctiveness.

¹¹⁶ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, Pg. 5-6.

¹¹⁷ James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction: 1948-1985* (New York: Beacon Press, 2021), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/harvard-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6715827>, Pg. 17.

¹¹⁸ Wenger, *Religious Freedom*, Pg. 146.

¹¹⁹ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, Pg. 5.

Following Goldstein, the analysis below aims to show how contemporary politically conservative Jews negotiate the relationship between Jewishness and whiteness, and what is at stake for them in doing so. In the section that follows, I outline their narrative in its own terms, illustrating the many overlapping though not identical perspectives found within conservative discussions of whiteness. The authors all agree that Jews are not white, but articulate multiple, mutually reinforcing reasons explaining why.

Rejecting Whiteness and a Progressive Worldview

Conservative Jews often root their rejection of the claim that Jews are white in the socially constructed nature of race. Dr. Pamela Paresky, a director at the Aspen Center for Human Development, makes such an argument in a *Mosaic* piece titled “Critical Race Theory Poses a Threat to Jews, and Not Only Because of Its Use by Anti-Zionists.”¹²⁰ Paresky – and her presumed audience – share a belief that anti-Zionists are necessarily a threat to Jews, and that critical race theory supports such actors. The other threat that the title hints at, described in the article itself, is that CRT encourages people to consider Jews white.

Paresky outlines several objections to viewing Jews as white. She writes, “Jews, who have never been seen as white by those for whom being white is a moral good, are . . . seen as white by those for whom whiteness is an unmitigated evil...”¹²¹ Paresky outlines what she sees as an irony in calling Jews white – that people who advance explicitly pro-white projects do not see Jews as such. She is likely referring to the antisemitism of white supremacists here. At the same time, those who understand whiteness negatively – indeed as an “unmitigated evil” - have now included Jews

¹²⁰ Pamela Paresky, “Critical Race Theory Poses a Threat to Jews, and Not Only Because of Its Use by Anti-Zionists,” *Mosaic Magazine*, August 2021, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/picks/politics-current-affairs/2021/06/critical-race-theory-poses-a-threat-to-jews-and-not-only-because-of-its-use-by-anti-zionists/>.

¹²¹ Ibid.

within the category. By pointing out that different groups see Jewish whiteness differently, Paresky calls the reader's attention to the social construction of whiteness and the historical contingency of Jews' inclusion in that category. Next, she points out the implications of whiteness for Jews. In calling them white, she claims, progressives associate Jews with evil. She also notes that such claims paint Jews as oppressors, erase Jewish distinctiveness, hamper progressive responses to antisemitism, and ultimately constitute a form of antisemitism themselves. By highlighting the unstable relationship between Jews and whiteness, as well as the political stakes of that relationship, Paresky argues against the idea that Jews are white. Other authors mirror these claims.

Ruth Wisse, an emerita professor of Yiddish Literature at Harvard University, articulates the idea that whiteness positions Jews as victimizers quite succinctly. She writes that according to the logic of intersectionality, "Jews are white (oppressors), Arabs are POCs (victims), and Israel-cum-American Jewry is the common enemy."¹²² Wisse presents progressive logic as a set of related binaries – one is either white or a person of color, an oppressor or a victim respectively. If one is the former, one becomes an "enemy." Like Paresky above, Wisse interprets the claim that Jews are white as a political charge, one which is harmful to Jews.

Wisse's claim also moves the reader from a specifically American context to a transnational one. Before the quote above, Wisse is commenting on the history of the civil rights movement's alliance of Black Americans and Jews. Yet, her analysis of intersectionality does not remain within the American context. Wisse and others often view progressives as critiquing Israel and American Jewry simultaneously as white. She links the domestic racial politics of the United States and Israel, then contends that progressives threaten Jewish interests on both counts.

¹²² Josef Joffe, "American Jews."

Similarly, Steven Hayward, a Fellow at Ashland University, notes that progressives associate some ethnic groups with whiteness more than others. He writes that “this once-despised minority [Jews are] being converted into part of the oppressor class along with white males, and Israel into an imperialist oppressor.”¹²³ Like Wisse’s article, Hayward’s piece moves the reader between a Middle Eastern and American context. Casting Jews as white informs a progressive belief that Israel is an oppressor, and vis versa. In arguing that progressives understand Israel and American Jews through a common lens of whiteness, Wisse and Hayward accomplish two related tasks. First, they underline that to be white is to be an oppressor. Second, they claim that calling Jews white supports a progressive critique of Israel by portraying that state as necessarily oppressive.

Still more is at stake for conservative Jews in discussing whiteness. They contend that portraying American Jews as white either renders progressives blind to antisemitism or is itself a form of antisemitism. As Seth Mandel writes in *Commentary*,

The left sees Jews as white (in contrast to the way blood-and-soil nationalists of the right view them) and Zionists as supporters of "white" colonial oppression. In the intersectionality hierarchy, protecting Jews from others simply doesn't rate, while protecting others from Jews is a common theme.¹²⁴

This quote draws together many of the ideas from the preceding paragraphs. Mandel claims that the left sees Jews as white, points out the instability of that designation, and associates it with a critique of Israel as well as with oppression through the term “Zionism.” He then takes another step: because of supposed Jewish whiteness, progressives do not prioritize protecting Jews. By casting Jews as racially privileged, progressives lose the ability to defend Jewish interests and protect them from harm.

¹²³ Steven Hayward, “How I Ran Afoul of Campus Cancel Culture: My Experience with the Goldman School at Berkeley,” *Commentary*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/steven-hayward/campus-cancel-culture-berkeley/>.

¹²⁴ Mandel “The Shame.”

In addition to arguing that whiteness obscures antisemitism, some authors say that it erases Jewish particularity. For Yonoson Rosenblum, a staff writer for *Mishpacha*, a California curriculum that does not list Jews as an ethnic minority exemplifies such erasure.¹²⁵ For Bari Weiss, an American journalist, through the lens of CRT “Jews are flattened into “white people,” our living history obliterated, so that someone with a straight face can suggest that the Holocaust was merely “white on white crime”.”¹²⁶ She points out the violence done through abstracting the particularity of Jewish experience into the category of whiteness. In so doing, however, Weiss refuses more than a particular analytical tool for understanding Jewish experiences in the United States. She is opposing a political project that seeks to mobilize Jews.

Finally, writers often view the claims of Jewish whiteness as a progressive attempt to politically mobilize the Jewish community. *Mosaic* published an excerpt from Rabbi Joe Schwartz, who writes that, “to accept one’s whiteness serves as a kind of public confession of inherited guilt: it means, we Jews have benefited from, and therefore are implicated in, “white supremacy”—and therefore must devote our political lives to fighting its structures.”¹²⁷ Schwartz sees whiteness as a type of “guilt,” and political action as the only way to rid oneself of it. In denying Jewish whiteness later in the piece, he is not just disputing an analysis of the social position of Jews within the United States, he is opposing a political project that seeks to dismantle whiteness.

In the unabridged version of his essay, Schwartz states:

If the Jews are the Jews, then their struggle is part of the larger struggle for freedom and self-respect shared by small, stubborn groups; if the Jews are white, then they are an

¹²⁵ Yonoson Rosenblum, “President Biden’s False Start,” *Mishpacha Magazine*, February 17, 2021, <https://mishpacha.com/president-bidens-false-start/>.

¹²⁶ Bari Weiss, “American Liberalism in Danger,” *Tablet Magazine*, October 15, 2020, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/stop-being-shocked>.

¹²⁷ Joe Schwartz, “American Jews Should Not Confess Their ‘Whiteness’,” *Mosaic Magazine*, November 2020, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/picks/politics-current-affairs/2020/11/american-jews-should-not-confess-their-whiteness/>.

obstacle to that struggle that must be defeated (or must ... “use our whiteness as an anti-racist instrument”) In practical terms, this means that I must not only march with BLM, but join its struggle against Zionism, as well.¹²⁸

Schwartz’s quote contains many objections to whiteness. Like other authors, he points out the political nature of the designation. Further, he does not attempt to argue that Jews do or do not fulfill some criteria for whiteness, instead he analyzes the political implications of that idea. Such a categorization has consequences – casting Jews as an “obstacle” to the struggle for freedom or requiring Jews to commit to an anti-racist politics. Finally, he claims that the result of anti-racist politics is a struggle against Zionism.

The authors above outline reinforcing accounts of the political stakes in the conversation around Jews and whiteness. They highlight the fact that white supremacists and other actors on the far right do not consider Jews white, emphasizing the social construction of whiteness. In so doing, they repudiate the politics of whiteness that supremacists advance. They also point to the political implications of calling Jews white. Conservative writers are deeply concerned that such language casts Jews as oppressors, even as enemies of freedom. Their concern links Israel and domestic politics. Within the United States, they contend that calling Jews white hampers progressive responses to antisemitism and erases Jewish distinctiveness. Finally, the writers deny whiteness as part of opposing a progressive call for an anti-racist politics. They view accepting the claim that Jews are white as accepting a progressive worldview.

Thus far, I have attempted to outline conservative Jewish responses to whiteness sympathetically. I will now transition to critiquing the discourse above. My critique is neither meant to exhaust the potential challenges to conservative claims, nor is it meant to provide grounds for dismissing every

¹²⁸ Joe Schwartz, “Bones of Joseph,” Letters from Tel Aviv, October 23, 2020, <https://www.patreon.com/posts/43059770>.

argument and observation discussed above. Indeed, I take the points regarding progressive antisemitism and Jewish erasure seriously. At the same time, the positions outlined above makes some assumptions that are worth examining.

*“No, Jews Aren’t White – We’re our own thing...”*¹²⁹

In their discussions of Jewish racialization, politically conservative Jews employ a post-racial politics. They believe that race no longer corresponds to social power or structural advantage. As such, they view whiteness as a purely political designation, one which they refute. Their denial becomes a point of tension, however, as politically conservative Jews struggle to articulate what American Jewish racial identity is, if not white. This tension, and the stakes behind it, becomes particularly evident in the few articles that engage with Jews of Color.

Conservative Jewish writers often employ a set of post-racial political claims in conversations about race. They maintain that racialization no longer impacts people’s ability to navigate the socio-economic realities of the United States.¹³⁰ The idea that the United States is post-racial began to grow in prominence in the 2000’s, with the usage of the term peaking in 2016.¹³¹ Mainstream journalists began using the term after Barack Obama announced his run for president.¹³² Obama

¹²⁹ Liel Leibovitz, “No, Jews Aren’t White,” *Commentary*, August 2021, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/liel-leibovitz/jews-are-not-white/>.

¹³⁰ Charles A. Gallagher “Color-Blind Privilege: The Social and Political Functions of Erasing the Color Line in Post Race America.” *Race, Gender & Class* 10, no. 4 (2003): 22–37.

¹³¹ “Google Books Ngram Viewer,” Google, Accessed March 25, 2022, https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=post-racial&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cpost%20-%20racial%3B%2Cc0#t1%3B%2Cpost%20-%20racial%3B%2Cc0.

¹³² Bettina L. Love and Brandelyn Tosolt, “Reality or Rhetoric? Barack Obama and Post-Racial America,” *Race, Gender & Class* 17, no. 3/4 (2010): 19–37.

himself gave speeches that seemed to relegate racism to the past.¹³³ If America could elect a Black man president, the argument went, then racism was no longer a significant factor in American life.

These authors employ several arguments to sustain a post-racial perspective. Instead of attributing differences in outcome for racialized groups to racism, they understand such differences as the result of culture. To justify this claim, they point to the success of some Black ethnic groups, Asian Americans, and American Jews.¹³⁴ One article in *Mishpacha* argued that class did correlate to privilege, using that claim as a means of dismissing systemic racism.¹³⁵ For Jewish conservatives, race is irrelevant to the lived experiences of individuals and structures of power within the United States.

One example of such an argument comes from Yonoson Rosenblum at *Mishpacha*. He writes that

The phenomenal success of Jews in every area — e.g., 30 percent of Nobel Prizes since 2000 — despite a millennia-long history of being the victims of expulsion, mass murder, and genocide, is an open refutation of the claim that only racism can explain why some groups are less successful, and that cultural factors are irrelevant.¹³⁶

According to Rosenblum, Jewish success, measured in Nobel Prizes, is the mark of a superior culture. It is not the partial result of negotiating a racial hierarchy. Indeed, he deploys Jewish success to refute two related ideas: that histories of oppression impact the present day and that racism explains group outcomes. The claim that Jews have a history of oppression and still succeeded becomes the proof that no group with a history of victimization can claim its oppression

¹³³ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor “Barack Obama’s Original Sin: America’s Post-Racial Illusion,” *The Guardian*, January 13, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/13/barack-obama-legacy-racism-criminal-justice-system>.

¹³⁴ Samuel J. Abrams and Jack Wertheimer, “The Woke Threat to America- and to American Jews,” *Commentary*, November 2021, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/samuel-abrams/woke-threatens-america-and-american-jews/>.

¹³⁵ Yonoson Rosenblum, “Jewish Privilege Is Real,” *Mishpacha Magazine*, September 29, 2020, <https://mishpacha.com/jewish-privilege-is-real/>.

¹³⁶ Yonoson Rosenblum, “Wokeness Is Coming for Us,” *Mishpacha Magazine*, November 4, 2020, <https://mishpacha.com/woke-is-coming-for-us/>.

as a current barrier. Rosenblum relegates oppression as a whole to the past and then denies that it could have any impact on the present. In so doing, he advances a post-racial view of the United States.

One sees traces of a post-racial analysis in how authors describe whiteness. They do not deny the existence of whiteness as an identity. When Weiss writes that “Jews are flattened into white people,” she is not denying the existence of white people. Rather, she is denying that Jews fit into that category. Similarly, Paresky and others point to the social construction of whiteness, but they do not contend that whiteness itself does not exist. One can be white, but in a post-racial world whiteness is not a marker of social power. In any case, these authors contend that Jews have neither white identity nor white privilege.

Jack Wertheimer and Samuel Abrams, professor of American Jewish History at the Jewish Theological Seminary and professor of politics at Sarah Lawrence college respectively, treat Jewish whiteness similarly. Their article in *Commentary* “The Woke Threat to America – and to American Jews” criticizes Robin DiAngelo’s book *White Fragility* for “portraying all whites as homogenous and riddled with racism...as supremacists who dominate other races”.¹³⁷ Later on, they note that “these alleged beneficiaries of “white privilege” are in the main but a few generations removed from their immigrant forebears.”¹³⁸ Throughout their piece, Wertheimer and Abrams use “white” to describe groups of Americans that they believe progressives malign. They take for granted that some Americans identify as white.

When discussing white privilege and white supremacy, however, the authors use scare quotes. In so doing, they mark those concepts as suspect. They do not deny that whiteness exists as an

¹³⁷ “Abrams and Wertheimer, “The Woke Threat.”

¹³⁸ Ibid.

identity, as much as the idea that being white marks privilege. At the same time, as seen above, they hint at the constructed nature of whiteness, arguing that Jews are “cast as part of the white, oppressor class.” For Wertheimer and Abrams, whiteness exists but Jews are not a part of that category.

Wertheimer and Abrams’ move to disassociate whiteness from white privilege implies a potential argument that they leave unmade. They could have said that Jews are white, but that progressive ideas of whiteness are flawed in portraying all white people as oppressors. Instead, they reiterate that progressives *call* Jews white. In attempting to create distance between Jews and whiteness, however, they do not propose an alternative way of thinking through Jewishness with reference to America’s racial politics. In other words, though Wertheimer and Abrams imply that Jews are not white, they do not answer precisely what they are.

Wertheimer and Abrams’ omission fits within the broader context of a post-racial politics – if race doesn’t matter, there is no need to attempt to define Jews racially. Yet, their omission marks a tension within politically conservative Jewish thought. Having denied Jewish whiteness, they struggle to find language to express Jewish identity within an American racial frame. To be clear, I am not arguing that there is a reality to racial frameworks that the politically conservative Jews surveyed here are denying (though the effects of such frameworks are all too real). Rather, I am arguing that they face difficulty negotiating racial frameworks without proposing a racial designation for American Jews. In an American discourse built around a Black/white color line, these writers want neither the politics of whiteness nor of Blackness. Yet, the racial discourse is powerful enough that they cannot avoid implicitly racializing Jewish bodies.

One sees this tension in the piece by Joe Schwartz referenced above and excerpted in *Mosaic*. Schwartz draws out the negative consequences of Jewish whiteness, arguing that:

There is no conceptual tension between Zionism and support for the black struggle for recognition and rights. The tension emerges only when Jews are identified not, like black Americans, as a distinct people, with a history of oppression and a distinct culture and religion in need of preservation and cultivation, but as an arm of the white power structure.¹³⁹

For Schwartz, Jews are a “distinct people” like Black Americans. He flattens Black difference into a single distinct culture and religion. He moves Blackness from the category of race to the category of peoplehood, rather than attempting to define Jews through race. If he had attempted the latter, he would have confronted at least three options: Jews as white, Jews as a Jewish race, and Jews as people of color.

Schwartz has already denied that Jews are white as outlined above. He is also likely wary of describing Jews as a race – potentially because white supremacists make similar claims or due to the connection between Jewish racialization and the Holocaust. Finally, he has the option of describing Jews as people of color. He may not pursue that route for several reasons. He may feel like describing light-skinned Jews as people of color, within the contemporary racial configurations of the United States, is unsustainable. He may also not want to accept the politics that might come with identifying as such. If Jews are people of color, they may well join in the anti-racist struggle that Schwartz is writing against. As a result, Schwartz decides to avoid the argument, moving the conversation from the terrain of race to that of peoplehood without calling for political solidarity between both peoples.

One of the few examples of an explicit mention of Jews of Color in these articles sheds additional light on this tension. Naomi Shaefer Riley, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and mother to two children, “whose father is black,”¹⁴⁰ refutes the claim that there is significant racism in her

¹³⁹ Schwartz, “Bones of Joseph.”

¹⁴⁰ Naomi Shaefer Riley, “My Kids and Their Elite Education in Racism,” *Commentary Magazine*, August 14, 2020 <https://www.commentary.org/articles/naomi-schaefer-riley/elite-education-racism/>.

children's school.¹⁴¹ She argues instead that progressive attempts at inclusion and diversity are tainted with racism.

Riley's piece points to two interesting dynamics. First, she reiterates the argument that racialization does not correspond to any form of social power outside the context of a progressive discourse. The progressive anti-racism project, for Riley, is harmful, anti-white, and itself racist. Second, she expresses concern that in racializing children, the school is displacing their Jewish identities. She writes, "[O]ur children would go from being seen as Jews who looked a little different from other Jews...to children whose racial identity mattered considerably and whose religious identity was a secondary, if not a trivial, concern."¹⁴² The sense that whiteness might displace Jewishness, as explored above, has a long history within the United States. Here, a similar anxiety applies to Jews of Color. Rather than considering race one part of a complex constellation of identities, Riley fears that her children's racial identities will dominate their Jewishness.

The concern around Jews of Color identifying with a racial group sheds additional light on why conservative Jews may think Jews should not identify as people of color. Riley, at least, views racial politics as displacing her children's Jewish identity. As with how conservatives express concern that secularism will dissolve Judaism, here Riley claims that progressive ideas of race will do the same. Again, there is a tension in the text: secularism is an anxiety specific to religion; that would imply that Riley's concern corresponds to a racialized sense of Jewish identity, even though she described Judaism as a religious identity in the text.

To summarize, these politically conservative Jewish writers reject whiteness. They do so for many reasons, but most of all, they deny whiteness because they understand it as a tool for mobilizing

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

people into progressive politics. They perceive such projects as harmful to Jewish interests. In articulating their opposition, they rely on a post-racial politics, which enables them to avoid defining Jewishness racially and to deny that Jews might have access to forms of white privilege. Doing so creates tension, however, as authors struggle to navigate America's racial discourse without racializing Jewish bodies.

Such discussions also highlight the fluidity between the insider and outsider narratives. Conservative Jewish rejections of whiteness reposition a progressive claim that Jews are now insiders as evidence for a conservative account of Jews as outsiders. Arguing that Jews are white does not affirm their place within the American mainstream at the present moment according to conservative Jews. Rather, for this group, it positions them as oppressors and exposes them to antisemitism.

The contemporary moment both resolves and reinscribes the negotiation between Jews and race discussed in Goldstein. If we take their post-racial attitude seriously, the interplay between the desire for, coercion towards, and suspicion of whiteness that Goldstein maps should no longer challenge conservative Jews. They have achieved, at least partially, insider status and do not need a racial identity. At the same time, conservative Jews feel compelled to respond to progressive assertions that Jews are white. Despite claiming the irrelevance of race, conservative Jews still must engage in such conversations and the anxieties and tensions that they produce.

Conclusion

The Cohen and Meisel piece which opened this essay does not explicitly engage with CRT, BLM, or race. Yet, their manifesto is in conversation with the racial politics of the contemporary moment. They align themselves as true American insiders, a role historically associated with whiteness, and

as allies to white Evangelical Christians. The absence of race in fact marks a post-racial politics. Cohen and Meisel do not need to discuss race because they likely believe that systemic racism is over, and that contemporary racial politics is a progressive organizing tool. Their post-racialism, however, has the effect of upholding white power structures.¹⁴³ In all these ways, Cohen and Meisel align politically conservative Jewish interests with white interests. Yet, the politically conservative Jewish writers in *Commentary*, *Mosaic*, and *Mishpacha* dispute the association of Jews and whiteness.

This discourse exists beyond the three magazines explored above. Ben Shapiro, a conservative Jewish columnist, recently hosted an episode of *The Ben Shapiro Show* responding to Whoopi Goldberg. Goldberg, a host on *The View*, had incorrectly stated that the Holocaust was not about race. In his show and on Twitter, Shapiro repeated many of the points seen above: the whole left believes that Jews are white, which makes them take antisemitism less seriously and fail to support Israel.¹⁴⁴ Similarly, he tweeted in 2015, “As a Jew, is my race also “white”? If so, how about my wife, whose entire family comes from Morocco?”¹⁴⁵ Again, a politically conservative Jewish commentator distances Jews from whiteness. Moreover, he brings up his wife who, as a Moroccan may not be racialized as white in contemporary America, to support his assertion. He erases the possibility of Jews of Color in part to protect his ability to reject a progressive politics. Shapiro has over 3.8 million followers on Twitter.¹⁴⁶ Over a million people watched the YouTube video of his response to Whoopi Goldberg and over 4.3 million people subscribe to his YouTube channel.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Gallagher, “Color-Blind Privilege.”

¹⁴⁴ Ben Shapiro, “Shapiro Reacts to Whoopi Goldberg’s INSANE Holocaust Remarks,” YouTube Accessed March 28, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=up6kTcB3A5I&ab_channel=BenShapiro; Ben Shapiro, Twitter Post, January 31, 2022, <https://twitter.com/benshapiro/status/1488247646687043584>.

¹⁴⁵ Ben Shapiro, Twitter Post, October 19, 2015, <https://twitter.com/benshapiro/status/656207278899499008>.

¹⁴⁶ “Ben Shapiro (@benshapiro),” Twitter, accessed March 28, 2022, <https://twitter.com/benshapiro>.

¹⁴⁷ Shapiro, “Shapiro Reacts.”

While this analysis is not comprehensive, it suggests that the views explored above circulate outside *Commentary*, *Mosaic*, and *Mishpacha*, and indeed beyond the Jewish community. Without supposing that this community is monolithic, it is reasonable to understand the perspectives above as more broadly informing politically conservative Jewish views.

Despite the promises of a supposedly post-racial America, conservative Jewish commentators continue to struggle to navigate discourses of race, whiteness, and Blackness. From their perspective, the American economic system enabled many Jews to rise into the middle class because it is a meritocracy. Jews succeeded because of their talents alone, with help from a Jewish culture well-suited to thrive in the American context. Moreover, even if there was racism within the United States, it is long since gone. As the success of sub-populations within racialized groups shows, anyone can succeed in the contemporary United States. At once, racism never mattered – and American Jews should not understand their integration into the middle class partially through the lens of negotiating whiteness – and if racism ever mattered, it certainly doesn't now.

In this narrative, American Jews are now insiders in a just American system. Progressive attempts to change that system threaten their insider status. For conservatives, such a move reads as displacing people who have earned the right to command their lives in favor of a bland and dangerous equality. Defending the American system through conservatism is good for the Jewish community. It supports the material interests of Jewish people, such as a strong Israeli state, and it supports authentic Judaism. Jews, from a conservative perspective, have earned security through economic success in the United States and military prowess in Israel. Progressives are wrongly attempting to take those supports away.

The writers above struggle to defend the American status quo in light of progressive anti-racist critiques. They see progressives as needlessly adding race to political conversations and argue that

race occludes rather than clarifies. They claim that progressives understand “whiteness” as a category that denotes privilege and oppressor status. Moreover, they assume that all progressives perceive Jews as unproblematically white. In response, conservative Jews note that the Jewish relationship with whiteness was and is fraught and that antisemitism has racialized aspects to it. Ironically, though in the past Jews struggled for inclusion into whiteness, contemporary conservatives believe that whiteness positions them as outsiders in a progressive America.

Their attempt to distance Jews from whiteness is itself fraught. Though they maintain that race does not matter, they do not deny the existence of racialized identities. In other words, they believe that racialized privilege does not exist, but are comfortable identifying people by race. As a result, they face a challenge. They do not want to identify American Jews as white, which they view as a progressive claim. They do not want American Jews identified as people of color, which might position them in opposition to the American racial system and erode Jewish identity. Indeed, they are uncomfortable with the concept of Jews of Color, which at least one author believes will result in a racial identity displacing Jewishness. Finally, they are uncomfortable calling Jews a race. America’s racial discourse presupposes racial identities, yet these authors assert that they have none – not by way of challenge but precisely to avoid engaging with the implications of this discourse. Instead, they maintain that Jews are “our own thing”, marking a tension within their thought.¹⁴⁸

If we pause at this moment of tension, where Jews are suspended between rejecting and affirming racialization, a few possible responses emerge. One potential response is an anti-racist politics based on the denial of Jewish whiteness. This project might reflect James Baldwin’s claim that “as

¹⁴⁸ Leibovitz, “No, Jews Aren’t White.”

long as you think you're white, there's no hope for you.”¹⁴⁹ Such a politics would use the tensions within Jewish racialization to point out the absurdity and injustice of the American racial system. Another response could be based on the affirmation of light-skinned Jews' contingent and partial access to whiteness. Jews might acknowledge a white identity and use it to dismantle racist power structures.¹⁵⁰ Politically conservative Jewish commentators refuse both options and any other type of anti-racist politics, instead denying the need for such change. Their hesitation in describing Jewish racial identity marks a means of upholding America's hierarchies (or at least, avoiding challenging them), rather than an attempt to destabilize them.

In critiquing their response to whiteness, I am not dismissing every observation that the writers above have made of progressives. There is antisemitism in progressive spaces and a related impulse to ignore it. As many progressives have pointed out, the fact that antisemitism often supposes that Jews have more power than others requires particular care in a politics that works towards equity. Indeed, the common claim of Jewish success, which exists well beyond the conservative context outlined above, erases the fact that between 16 and 20% of American Jewish households earn less than \$30,000 a year.¹⁵¹ Similarly, though not all criticism of Israel is antisemitic, some of it can become so. I see the critiques conservatives make as useful data in developing a stronger, more inclusive progressive politics.

Jews have struggled to negotiate their identities since arriving in North America. The difficulties politically conservative Jews face today navigating American racial discourse is another iteration

¹⁴⁹ “The Politics of White Identity – AISSR,” Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam, October 14, 2019, <https://aissr.uva.nl/content/events/events/2019/11/the-politics-of-white-identity.html>.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, “What Do We Know about Jewish Poverty in the United States?” *eJewish Philanthropy*, March 19, 2019, <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/what-do-we-know-about-jewish-poverty-in-the-united-states/>.

of such perennial challenges. The fact that these discourses continue to change marks an opportunity. The American Jewish community can reimagine itself in response to changing circumstances. This narrative work can address the fears of politically conservative Jews, ensuring that all members of the increasingly diverse American Jewish community can find a home within it. Ultimately, one can sustain the Jewish community, advocate for racial justice, and honor all Jewish identities, including secular Jews, Jews with progressive Israel politics, and Jews of Color. Such commitments strengthen the Jewish community and foster a more just world.

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