

Our Own Worst Enemies

How does the history of American racism reverberate in the cultures and hierarchies of the American Jewish community?

This lesson provides the historical background for the racial categorizations of Jews in the United States, beginning with examples from Jewish experience in colonial era North America. Devin Naar demonstrates how ideas from race “science” shaped the behaviors of Ashkenazi Jews as they sought protections as American citizens and as members of mainstream American culture. Sometimes, Ashkenazi Jews actively marginalized Sephardic Jews in their efforts to hold onto the elusive benefits of citizenship and of being considered White. Naar’s work exposes the deeply entrenched historical linkages between anti-Black racism and what commentators sometimes call “Ashkenormativity” (the idea that Ashkenazi culture is the default Jewish culture) within American Jewish communal life.

GOALS

- Participants will consider how Jewish experience in the United States has included both vulnerability and privilege.
- Participants will encounter the key ideas of race “science” and how it is problematic.
- Participants will unpack Jewish experience around racial requirements for U.S. citizenship, especially vis a vis race “science.”
- Participants will be introduced to the concept of “Ashkenormativity,” and consider its historical roots in American racist policies.

MATERIALS

- Devin Naar video: Between Privilege and Peril
<https://vimeo.com/784631071/99613aab59>
- Devin Naar video: White by Law
<https://vimeo.com/784632190/e988f8ded6>
- Appendix A: Handout of Primary Sources

LESSON

Welcome: Introductions to the topic, the facilitator and the participants.

What brought you to this session?: 10 minutes

- Initial reflection prompt (for writing, or conversation): Scholar Devin Naar explores how Jews coming to the United States have found themselves “between Privilege and Peril.” How has life in the US reflected opportunity and/or vulnerability--for you, your family, your community?

Watch Devin Naar’s short video Between Privilege and Peril”: 20 minutes

This short video introduces the development of Jewish racial identity in 17th and 18th century North America. See Appendix A, Primary Source 1, for text from George Washington’s letter to the Jews of Newport, Rhode Island.

- Reaction Questions:
 - Naar unpacks a celebrated moment in American Jewish History– Washington’s Letter to the Jews. What was new in Naar’s presentation? What was challenging? What was exciting?
 - Were there other moments in the video that surprised, challenged or excited you?
- Comprehension Questions:
 - Why were Jews welcomed in New Amsterdam? What was “useful” about them?
 - How does the sense that Jews must be “useful” affect Jewish sense of security and behavior?
 - As European Jews came to North America, they switched from being “the” racial other (as they were in the European contexts) to being one among several racial others (including African Americans, Native Americans). What behavior does Naar highlight as paradigmatic of and required for Jews to be seen as White?
 - How does Washington’s letter to the Jews of Newport exemplify both the privilege and the peril of Jewish circumstances in North America?
- Discussion Question:
 - How would these early experiences of Jews in North America shape European Jews’ sense of identity and security in the United States going forward?

Race, Religion & American Judaism

Jews, Whiteness and Citizenship: 30 minutes

- Primary Source 2 (See Appendix A). This text states who can be a U.S. citizen, with all its related privileges, according to the new U.S. Congress in 1790.
 - According to the original framers of the U.S. government, who can be a citizen? Who can't? Where is there a gray area around who can be a citizen?
 - Note that this law was passed by the U.S. Congress in 1790, the same year that George Washington wrote his letter to the Jews of Newport. How do these documents relate to each other? What can we learn about Jewish racialization at the time from reading them together?
- Primary Source 3: After the Civil War, a new category of eligibility for citizenship was introduced: being Black or of "African nativity." This framing still conveniently excluded Asians, however, and rendered people from the Middle East and South Asia test cases for the boundaries of whiteness. Racism didn't disappear and xenophobia grew as immigrants from around the world began to show up at the US borders. President Teddy Roosevelt, buying into concepts of "race science" of his time, commissioned a report about the different "races" to help his administration establish immigration policy. This chart models central concepts of "race science"--that there exist distinct and meaningful groups of humans that are different "races," and that these groups exist in a hierarchy.
 - As you look at the chart, what problems or questions arise about the idea that there exist distinct "races"?
 - Having a hierarchy of races is obviously a racist concept, and it was used to keep certain groups out of the United States through immigration policies based on these ideas. How might having these ideas in public policy affect the behavior of immigrants coming to the U.S.?
 - What do you notice about how Jews are classified? What problems exist specifically around this classification? How might someone respond to being classified in this way, especially if their goal is to be accepted as a U.S. citizen?

Race, Religion & American Judaism

- Watch Devin Naar's video *White by Law* starting at 7:30.

Naar is discussing how people of various backgrounds went to court in the early 20th century to prove their whiteness in order to gain U.S. citizenship. The case of Syrian immigrants was particularly relevant for Jews, as according to the race "science" of the times, both Jews and Arab peoples were Semitic, so the fate of one group affected the fate of the other in terms of U.S. citizenship policy. [For more on how U.S. policy fails to acknowledge and respect the experiences of Middle Eastern and North African people, see Mijal Bitton's main video. <https://vimeo.com/792787729/b4ebdfec1>] Naar describes how Jews responded to a test case where a Syrian made a case for citizenship based on the acceptance of Jews of European descent as citizens.

- What did Judge Henry Smith rule about Jewish racial identity? What contradiction does this ruling raise for race "science" of the time?
- How did this ruling affect the behavior of European Jews towards Jews from Syria and other Arab lands?

Connect this historical background to contemporary American Jewish life by defining the term "Ashkenormativity," the idea that Ashkenazi culture is the default Jewish culture within the American Jewish community. Naar's argument is that Ashkenazi Jews who feared their own claims to citizenship were endangered actively distanced themselves from more newly arrived Sephardic immigrants, imposing a marginal status upon them. These harmful dynamics of marginalization continue today.

Concluding Reflections: 10 minutes

- What are some examples of how the racial hierarchies that were established in American law and culture impacted Jews of different backgrounds?
- What connections do you see between Ashkenormativity in the contemporary American Jewish world and the racist policies and ideas of 18th and 19th century American life?
- How does the historical material covered in this lesson affect how you would categorize Jews and Judaism? (Has your answer changed since the start of the lesson?)

Primary Sources

1. *Excerpt of George Washington's Letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport (1790)*

Gentlemen:

...The citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy – a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship.

It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights, for, happily, the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support... May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants – while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid...

G. Washington

2.

ACTS OF THE FIRST CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES,

Passed at the second session, which was begun and held at the City of New York on Monday, the fourth day of January, 1790, and ended on the twelfth day of August, 1790.

GEORGE WASHINGTON, President, JOHN ADAMS, Vice President of the United States, and President of the Senate, FREDERICK AUGUSTUS MUHLENBERG, Speaker of the House of Representatives.

SECTION 1. *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That any alien, being a free white person, who shall have resided within the limits and under the jurisdiction of the United States for the term of two years, may be admitted to become a citizen thereof, on application to any com-*

Appendix A

Race, Religion & American Judaism

3.

COMPARATIVE CLASSIFICATION OF IMMIGRANT RACES OR PEOPLES.

Based on Brinton (of. Keane).			People.	Ripley's races, with other corresponding terms.
Race.	Stock.	Group.		
Caucasian..	Aryan.....	Teutonic....	Scandinavian:	I. TEUTONIC. H. Europæus (Lapouge). Nordic (Deniker). Dolicho-leptorhine (Kohlmann). Germanic (English writers). Reihengräber (German writers). Kymric (French writers). Part Alpine. II. ALPINE (OR CELTIC). H. Alpinus (Lapouge). Occidental (Deniker). Disentis (German writers). Celts-Slavic (French writers). Lappanoid (Pruner-Bey). Sarmatian (von Hölder). Arvernian (Beddoe).
			Danish.....	
			Norwegian.....	
		Swedish.....		
		German (N. part).....		
		Dutch.....		
		English (part).....		
		Flemish.....		
		Lithuanian.....		
		Scotch (part).....		
	Lettic.....	Irish (part).....		
		Welsh.....		
	Celtic.....	Russian.....		
		Polish.....		
	Slavonic.....	Czech:		
		Bohemian.....		
		Moravian.....		
		Servian.....		
		Croatian.....		
		Montenegrin.....		
Slovak.....				
Slovenian.....				
Ruthenian.....				
Dalmatian.....				
Herzegovinian.....				
Illyric.....	Bosnian.....			
	Albanian.....			
Armenic.....	Armenian.....			
	(French.....			
Italic.....	Italian (part).....			
	Roumanian.....			
Hellenic.....	Spanish.....			
	Spanish-American.....			
Iranic.....	Mexican, etc.....			
	Portuguese.....			
Semitic.....	Greek.....			
	Hindu.....			
Caucasic.....	Gypsy.....			
	Arabian.....			
Euskalic.....	Hebrew.....			
	Syrian.....			
Mongolian..	Sibirie.....	Chaldaic.....		
		Caucasus peoples.....		
	Tataric.....	Basque.....		
		Japanese, Korean.....		
	Mongolic.....	Finnish.....		
		Magyar.....		
	Sinitic.....	Lappish.....		
		Bulgarian (part).....		
	Malay.....	Tataric.....		
		Chinese.....		
Ethiopian..	Chinese.....			
	East Indian (part, i. e., Indo-Chinese). Pacific Islander (part). East Indian (part).....			
American (Indian).	Negro.....			
	American Indian.....			

Appendix A