

Exploring “Ashkenormativity”

Who and what are we missing when we equate Jewishness with White European ancestry?

This foundational session offers participants learning and facts around the many identities of Jews including Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, Sepharadim, and Jews of Color. The focus is on Jews in the United States. In this session diversity focuses on racial and cultural identity with an exploration of how Jewish identity goes beyond Ashkenazi Jews.

This lesson is informed by the scholarship of Professor Devin Naar, who studies the history of Sepharadim in the United States. His research shows how the racial hierarchies of the U.S. imposed hierarchies within the American Jewish world, damaging relations among Jewish groups. Until today, “Jewish” is presumed to refer to White, Ashkenazi Jews, while Jews of other backgrounds and identities are treated as “others,” and need to use additional descriptors, like “Sephardic Jews,” or “Jews of Color.” A new term for the presumption that Ashkenazi identity is the default identity of American Jews is “Ashkenormative.” This is a presumption that renders lots of Jews and Jewish cultures invisible. It reflects a history in which racist ideas penetrated Jewish life, so that certain Jewish identities gained the power and prestige to speak for the Jewish community as a whole, while other Jewish communities were pushed to the margins.

GOALS

- Participants will understand that the Jewish community is and always has been multiracial and multicultural.
- Participants will understand the term “Ashkenormative”
- Participants will increase their knowledge of who comprise the Jewish people.

MATERIALS

- “Types of Jews: Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi and More,” My Jewish Learning <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUHP6ot-JPg>
- “Sephardic Jews” video Devin Naar <https://vimeo.com/784631590/43d15a8d34>
- “Racism in the Jewish Community: An Uncomfortable Truth,” Ilana Kaufman <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCtBqbsZPLo>
- “JIMENA Celebrates Mizrahi Culture,” https://vimeo.com/772273065?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=3434288
- Phones or electronic devices with internet access

LESSON

Warm-up: 5 minutes

Close your eyes and imagine a room full of Jewish people. [Give 5 seconds of quiet.] Keep imagining that room and the people.... What do you see? What does the room look like? What are the people doing? What ages do you see? What are the people wearing? What language is being spoken? What skin tones do you see?

- What and who did you imagine initially?
- What and who did you imagine as more questions were asked?

[Facilitator: After sharing is complete, the facilitator can use some of what was shared to frame the broader lesson of how we think about the Jewish people. Themes that may come up are American Jewry that is primarily Ashkenazi with European ancestry. Depending on the conversation you may explain that some of what we will discuss is meant to broaden our assumptions or may confirm what others imagined, that we are and always have been a multiracial, multicultural, multiethnic Jewish people who have been impacted by policies and decisions in the United States.]

Introduction: 7 minutes

Let’s watch this short video “Types of Jews: Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi and More” from My Jewish Learning about Jews in Israel.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUHP6ot-JPg>

Race, Religion & American Judaism

Many of the people in the video we just watched are also represented and live in the United States. It's also worth knowing that the makeup of the Jewish population in the U.S. has been debated. According to the Pew Research Center 92% of Jews in the U.S. identify as White and 8% identify as something other than White. At the same time, a report completed by the Jews of Color Field Building Initiative contends that the methods including those used by the Pew study are flawed. When that method was changed, JOCI estimated that 12-15% of Jews are Jews of Color or Jews who do not identify as White. The findings from JOCI are different from those of other demographic studies after being conscious of counting those who had not been counted in the past. Regardless, we know that the Jewish people are only becoming more diverse by the year.

Part of understanding who we are as a large Jewish community in the U.S. is understanding the many backgrounds that Jews have.

- Scholar Devin Naar, who we will meet in the next video, points out that until today, “Jewish” is presumed to refer to White, Ashkenazi Jews, while Jews of other backgrounds and identities are treated as “others,” and need to use additional descriptors, like “Sephardic Jews,” or “Jews of Color.”
- Has anyone heard the term “Ashkenormative”?
- [Ask or provide a definition. Make sure to make the point that Jews of Color can also be Ashkenazi.]
- What is the difference between “Ashkenazi” and “Ashkenormative?”

Rabbi Rachel Solomin defines Ashkenazi Jews as the Jewish ethnic identity most readily recognized by North Americans – the culture of matzah balls, black-hatted Hasidim and Yiddish. This ethnicity originated in medieval Germany. Although strictly speaking, “Ashkenazim” refers to Jews of Germany, the term has come to refer more broadly to Jews from Central and Eastern Europe. As an example, the Reform movement is based on Ashkenazi norms. What is more, there are many Jews of Color who are also Ashkenazi.

There is a lot to learn and value about the history and culture of Ashkenazi Jews. The problem is when we assume that all American Jews are Ashkenazi (that is called “Ashkenormativity”).

Discussion: 20 minutes

We are going to watch a series of three video clips back to back to back. Taken together, these videos start to tell a story of our community.

[Play the videos back to back without breaking for discussion or comment.]

- “Sephardic Jews” Devin Naar from 5:40-end
<https://vimeo.com/784631590/43d15a8d34>
- “Racism in the Jewish Community: An Uncomfortable Truth,” Ilana Kaufman <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCtBqbsZPLo> From :00-1:55
- “JIMENA Celebrates Mizrahi Culture” https://vimeo.com/772273065?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=3434288 6:58-8:37

The videos are good reminders of the vastness of Jewish people and the community. The videos also do not include all who are part of our community and the many identities people hold.

Discussion

- What is meant by “Jewish history, without Mizrahi history, is like a book missing half of the chapters”?
- Can we expand the idea of not just Mizrahi history being ½ of a missing story and think of how we can be more inclusive? Who ALL needs to be included that makes up the totality of the Jewish community?
- Have you ever experienced surprise or disbelief when you’ve seen someone who does not fit the White Ashkenazi Jewish phenotype assert their Jewish identity? If so, where did that come from?
- How do diversity and belonging within our Jewish community make us stronger?

Race, Religion & American Judaism

Small group Activity: 17 minutes

With your phones, research one aspect of Jewish diversity that interests your groups. Topics can vary. A few examples might include migration patterns, specific groups focusing on Jews of Color in the United States (e.g., Jewpanese, Jewtina, JIMENA, Black Jewish Liberation Collective, etc...), foods popular in different cultures, melodies used for prayers, etc....

Share out: 7 minutes

- What did you research?
- What interesting fact did you find?
- What's one takeaway from your research?

Closing (1 min)

Thank you for taking the time to be together and learn together. It's a very important thing for us to remember that the Jewish community is mutiracial, multicultural, multiethnic and always has been. We can remember that Jewishness includes the cultures from every continent. Our mandate is to remember how we are a community of many and we can remind people of this.

RESOURCES

- “Pew’s 2020 Survey Shows a Diverse and Divided American Jewry” Helen Chernikoff <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/pews-2020-survey-shows-a-diverse-and-divided-american-jewry/>
- “Counting Inconsistencies: An Analysis of American Jewish Population Studies with a Focus on Jews of Color” Jews of Color Initiative <https://jewsofcolorinitiative.org/research-article/counting-inconsistencies-an-analysis-of-american-jewish-population-studies-with-a-focus-on-jews-of-color/>
- “Beyond the Count: Perspectives and Lived Experiences of Jews of Color” Jews of Color Initiative https://jewsofcolorinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/BEYONDTHECOUNT.FINAL_8.12.21.pdf
- Ashkenazi Jews are the Jewish ethnic identity most readily recognized by North Americans – the culture of matzah balls, black-hatted Hasidim and Yiddish. This ethnicity originated in medieval Germany. Although strictly speaking, “Ashkenazim” refers to Jews of Germany, the term has come to refer more broadly to Jews from Central and Eastern Europe. (Definition from Who are Ashkenazi Jews by Rabbi Rachel M. Solomin <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/who-are-ashkenazi-jews/>)

Our Own Worst Enemies

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

Scholar Devin Naar provides the historical context for Jewish participation in the United States that goes back to the founding of the country. This lesson highlights various moments in the history of U.S. Jewish immigration and Jewish interaction with American power structures in order to foster a nuanced conversation about how people were legally racialized in the United States and the structures of a racial hierarchy.

GOALS

- Participants will understand that Jews' acceptance in the U.S. came with conditions.
- Participants will explore the conditions set by the colonizers of the U.S.
- Participants will explore historical Whiteness in the U.S.

MATERIALS

- "White by Law," Devin Naar <https://vimeo.com/784632190/e988f8ded6>
- "Between Privilege and Peril," Devin Naar <https://vimeo.com/784631071/99613aab59>

LESSON

Warm-up: 5 minutes

- In the United States, who are White people?

Share your answer with a partner and jot down your shared definition. Put your answers somewhere to come back to them later.

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Watch “Between Privilege and Peril”: 10 minutes

Scholar Devin Naar provides a historical context for Jews immigrating to the United States. This short video introduces the development of Jewish racial identity in 18th and 19th century North America.

[Facilitator note: Watch from :00-3:51 stopping after “useful to the state's objectives” then continue at 6:20 to the end.]

Similar age small group discussion: 15 minutes

- Why were Jews welcomed in New Amsterdam? What was “useful” about them?
- How does the sense that Jews must be “useful” affect Jews’ 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 behaviors does Naar suggest that Jews must do in order to be accepted as White?
- How does Washington’s letter to the Jews of Newport exemplify both the privilege and the peril of Jewish identity in North America?

Watch and discuss “White by Law”: 25 minutes

Devin Naar states that “From the beginning [of United States history], whiteness and Americanness was inextricably linked.”

- How did your definition of who is White compare to what was said in the videos?
- What makes sense to you about how Whiteness was determined in early United States history? What doesn’t make sense? In our world today, when it comes to racial identity, what makes sense to you and what doesn’t?
- What did you think about the early recognition that Jews were a part of the people they came from? How does that influence your thoughts about Jewish peoplehood?

Final Questions

- Was anyone surprised by the learning today?
- Was there anything that was confusing or unresolved in your groups?
- What made sense and what didn't with how race was decided?

Close: 5 minutes

Ask each participant to share one question about the topic that remains with them.

There was a lot of information that we learned and discussed in today's session. I encourage people to continue to think about what we learned and think about how experiences from the 18th and 19th century continue to impact our lives today. Thank you for the opportunity to learn and grow together.