

Race, Religion & American Judaism

Welcome to the adult curriculum for *Race, Religion, and American Judaism*. The lesson plans and facilitator notes that are collected here offer guidance for how to bring ten original, scholarly research projects about Jews and race to groups of adult learners. These lessons are appropriate for a wide variety of formal and informal education settings. Each lesson can be used individually, or as part of an extended 8-10 week course of study.

Facilitators and individual learners are encouraged to engage more deeply with the ten research projects that are profiled on jewsandrace.com

In video lectures, leading scholars introduce themselves and describe their research projects, highlighting their key findings.

For those who are building a course, this introduction and overview organizes the research projects into two overarching units which each include four sessions:

- The Racialization of Jews
 - Our Own Worst Enemies (Devin Naar)
 - Race Before the Law (Jennifer Glaser)
 - Case Studies in Jewish Identity (Shana Sippy)
 - Learning from Cuban Jews and Syrian Jews (Mijal Bitton and Mark Goldberg)
- Ethical Responses to Racism
 - Responding to Racial Microaggressions (Buffie Longmire-Avital)
 - Countering White Nationalism and Antisemitism (Sophie Bjork-James)
 - Jewish Perspectives on Reparations (Jonathan Crane)
 - Repairing Jewish Pioneer Memory (Maxwell Greenberg)

The Racialization of Jews: What is in this unit?

Across time and space, the Jewish experience is characterized by the multiracial, multiethnic composition of the Jewish people, a diverse cultural tapestry. Within the North American context, however, white-presenting Ashkenazi Jews have long comprised the majority of most Jewish communities and institutions, and many conversations about race and Jewish identity have focused exclusively on the changing racialization of white-presenting Jews. The long, lethal history of racism has made the question of white-presenting Jews' racial identity a particularly vexing one. In this unit, we look at the history of how government policies have addressed Jewish identity, how American racial ideas shaped Jewish experience and communities, and how the language of race and religion are in many ways inadequate for describing Jews and other people.

Through assimilation and other factors, over the course of the 20th century, white-presenting Ashkenazi Jews in the United States came to be seen in most contexts as White, gaining protections and privileges attached to that identity. At the same time, all Jews continue to contend with the continuing presence of antisemitism, White nationalist ideology, and the ongoing legacy of race “science” ideas that cast all Jews as non-white. Vulnerable in some contexts and protected in others, White Jews have sometimes exhibited racism against Black people and toward Jews of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds.

The story of the changing racialization of white-presenting Jews in America is a case study that illuminates the workings of race in American life. While this unit focuses on the experiences of Jews, it offers lessons about how race affects all Americans.

“Jewish” as a legal category?

Scholar Devin Naar provides the history of how American authorities related to Jews and how Jews were categorized in racial hierarchies. He explains how race “science” influenced the behaviors of Jews of European descent in their pursuit of legal protections and social belonging as American citizens and how they internalized racist ideas and marginalized Sephardic Jews. His work prompts discussion about the legacy of race “science” and how racist ideas continue to shape power relations in American Jewish life.

Extending the history of American Jews and race into the late twentieth century, scholar Jennifer Glaser explores Jewish racial identity in Supreme Court cases. In one of those cases, *Shaare Tefila v. Cobb*, we can see the challenges of delineating definitions of “race” and of “Jewish.” Glaser uses concepts drawn from critical race theory (CRT) to illuminate the tensions within the concept of race—On the one hand, “race” is a made-up category, while on the other, it has real and meaningful implications in our lives. There is an optional section for learning about CRT and applying its concepts directly to the case.

Grounding the Conversation in Theory

Talking about Jewish identity/ies is complicated! Even the language that is often used, terms like “race” and “religion” are fraught. Scholar Shana Sippy introduces how the rhetoric of “race” and “religion,” in general and specifically as applied to Jewish identity, were created by people, in specific contexts, with specific purposes. Instead of being two separate categories, as is commonly imagined, Sippy demonstrates through historical examples how these categories are actually deeply connected, each affecting how the other one is used and understood. The lesson based on Sippy’s work invites participants to explore a few of her examples and practice identifying how the categories of race and religion are intertwined and affect each other.

Jews Navigate American Race Systems

Scholars Mijal Bitton and Mark Goldberg studied the unique experiences of Syrian Jews and Cuban Jews respectively. Both scholars provide fascinating insight into Jewish minority groups. Their work highlights how both Syrian Jews and Cuban Jews are themselves diverse groups, contradicting any notions that Jews can be easily placed in racial categories based on skin color. We offer a lesson that explores interactions between the Jews already residing in the States and more recent immigrants, exploring how the American racial landscape affected the experience and behaviors of these two Jewish migrant communities.

Ethical Responses to Racism: What is in this unit?

This unit highlights the work of four scholars from different fields. Though each scholar's focus is very different, all of their work provides opportunities for us to reflect on how to respond to racism and limit its harmful effects in our lives. The lessons based on these four scholars are each designed to stand alone. However, they can be taught together as well.

Two scholars explore aspects of stopping racism wherever it can be found. Buffie Longmire-Avital's work focuses on understanding and addressing microaggressions, specifically daily instances of racism within the American Jewish community. While Longmire-Avital's work looks inward, Sophie Bjork-James' work looks outward to address the danger of White nationalist ideology, and how addressing antisemitism is a necessary part of stopping it.

The other two scholars start with the realities of racial harm that has already been committed, and ask in different ways what can and should be done now to repair the harm. Jonathan Crane's work addresses the national conversation about American reparations. Responding to the imperative that reparations should be made, he looks for Jewish ethical perspectives within traditional sources from the Torah and rabbinic literature to find rationales. Maxwell Greenberg's work is a case study in how to approach one particular and complex instance of harm: land originally stolen from Chiricahua Apaches and used to create Jewish burial grounds for Jews in Arizona.

These lessons invite us to consider our own rationales and motivations for the work of repair—both teshuvah (repentance) and tikun (fixing)—and how we can go about doing it.

How to use these materials

Teachers and facilitators are strongly encouraged to prepare for teaching these lessons by spending time learning directly from the scholars' video lectures and supplementary materials. The lectures provide background and context for the lessons, which are designed to explore and unpack specific parts of the research.

The complexity of this scholarship means that the materials presented here could easily take more than one lesson (1-1.5 hrs) to teach and discuss. We offer suggested time increments as an aid in your planning, with the expectation that teachers and facilitators will build lessons appropriate for their contexts from the outlines and activities provided. Depending on the size, backgrounds, and interests of your group, you may choose to focus on particular parts of the lessons, extend a lesson plan over more than one session, or run through the flow as it is laid out.

A final note to teachers and facilitators

Race and identity are personal, sensitive topics. We offer the following expectations as a starting point for productive, growthful conversations:

1. It's important for facilitators to notice and remind people that Jews have always reflected a range of skin colors and a diversity of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. There have always been Jews of Color, though we haven't always used this language.
2. Everyone is on a journey learning about these topics. We must assume the best intentions in each other in the process.
3. Though it may be challenging, learning and talking about dynamics of race in the Jewish community is an important foundation for the important work of opposing racism in the United States and in the Jewish community.