

Are the Jews a Race?

America's Jewish population has had a very confusing relationship with the notion of race. As I mentioned in the Welcome essay, the word "race" historically referred to "nations" or "tribes" of people—groups who shared the same language, lifestyle, traditions, religion, political system, history, marriage customs, and usually had spent enough time together as a group to develop signature physical traits. For most of history, groups of people who would be considered "races" were often not fixed to one piece of land. Their kingdoms or chiefdoms would expand or shrink, or their capitals would move with political successes and failures, such as when the seat of the Roman Empire moved from Rome to Constantinople. Political systems that incorporated many races were called "empires" and their borders were determined by the strength of the emperor. The Jewish people developed the notion of themselves as a race during ancient times. The Jewish people at first had their own kingdom, but once it was destroyed by first the Assyrians and then the Babylonians, the Jews became a nation without a homeland. That actually was alright for a while, because they often proved their worth to whatever nation or empire they occupied, contributing consistently to its educational, philosophical, and artistic development. Along with the Roman Empire, they dispersed throughout Europe, Asia, and Africa. The switch to Constantinople, however, also included the institutionalization of Christianity, which often cast the Jewish "race" as treacherous "others." Now, wherever Christianity spread, the Jews would be looked at with suspicion. The general feeling was that the Jews had more allegiance to each other than they did to whatever nation they were a part of. Many people believed, for instance, that French Jews and British Jews would rather conspire with each other than fight for either France or England. They were therefore always the first suspected and persecuted whenever any suspicious disease or catastrophe would befall a nation. "The Jews probably did it. Let's get 'em." Over and over again, for 2,000 years.

As European global exploration was cresting, a trend grew in Western civilization that linked having fixed borders to being "civilized." Having fixed borders made the constant international wars that had engulfed the European continent since the end of the Black Plague more manageable. Andy McKeown wrote a great book called "Melancholy Order" about the invention of the national border and passport regulations, and how it was designed to keep certain people in and certain people out. By the end of WWI, the Ottoman Empire was the only major political entity that had not adopted the nation-state model, and they lost that war. Now, everyone lived in nation-states, and Jews throughout the world were involved in nationalist projects (flags, national anthems, historical heroes, etc.). Like the Irish, Jews in America were expected to register themselves as white on the census even though they experienced the same sort of racialized discrimination that blacks and Native Americans did. However, due to the Jewish history of international discrimination throughout Europe, they had devised elaborate coping strategies within a culture designed to protect and defray its effects—Jewish people congregated in urban spaces, for instance, for the protection of the herd and because Jewish farmers had so many times in Europe had their lands seized, so the Jewish economy was built on nonagriculture-related businesses; the Jewish people knew how to negotiate for civil rights by organizing into politically cohesive constituencies or voting blocks; and they maintained a tradition of passing down legacies and knowledge in difficult circumstances, so that intergenerational struggles for freedom could maintain

engagement. In the fight for black civil rights, then, America was witness to a sort of remarkable phenomenon. Contrary to every other European ethnicity that could socially pass for white, a sizeable number of the Jewish people in America's history openly identified with the plight of black people, who had long seen themselves as the persecuted "chosen people" of the New World. That's why so many gospel songs address themes like Moses asking the pharaoh let his people go. More than any other American ethnicity, Jews participated in and worked alongside blacks in both the New Negro Movement of the 1920s and 1930s and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The Jews have maintained to this day a space outside of the five classic races formalized by Blumenbach and Linnaeus and that the American census eventually settled on. While some Jews do downplay their ethnic identity and pass into the American mainstream, other Jews that choose to identify with the black narrative of civil rights and social justice as a unifying principle also have an accepted place within Jewish culture. So are the Jews a race? Maybe, in the classic sense, who knows? But they vary in their individual choice of identifying with the narratives of either "whiteness" or "blackness" in America.