Jews of Color: Experiences of Inclusion and Exclusion

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Introduction:

In the United States, Jewish identity has largely been dominated and defined by Ashkenazi Jews and their heritage, whose lineage can be traced back to Eastern and Central Europe. In their study, Kendra Watkins states that this "prevailing image of American Jewry is closely linked with whiteness," reinforcing the conceptualization and generalization of American Jewry with whiteness (Watkins, 2019). However, hundreds of thousands of Jews of Color (JOC) exist within the borders of the United States, proving that whiteness should not be a defining descriptor of Judaism or the Jewish people. The battle of recognition and representation between Jews of Color and the dominating assumption of Jewish whiteness in the United States often produces an environment of racism and exclusion for Jewish community members of color.

My interest in this topic is largely due to my own positionality and personal experience as an Asian American Jewish woman. I have grown up as an active member in predominantly white Jewish institutions, granting me extensive knowledge on this topic as well as Jewish spaces. For the purpose of this research, Jewish spaces are defined as any space/group/organization that exists for the purpose of creating a Jewish community. This includes, but is not limited to, synagogues, temples, Jewish non-profits, youth groups, summer camps, Jewish for-profit organizations, schools, etc. My intersecting identities have been questioned my whole life, especially in Jewish communities. Throughout my adolescence and even into my young adult life, I have frequently received questions asking if I am adopted, if I converted, exactly how I am Jewish, and if I am even actually Jewish. Many of the Jewish communities that I have been a part of and love dearly are heavily gate kept, which is something that I have seen discourage people from joining. As someone with an identity that has been questioned, even in the Jewish spaces

that I love so dearly, I recognize that this part of Judaism and Jewish spaces is far overdue for systemic change. Judaism is incredibly diverse, and it's time that our Jewish spaces reflect the diversity of our community.

My research primarily focuses on Jews of Color, which is defined by the Religion Action Center of Reform Judaism as a "pan-ethnic term that is used to identify Jews whose family origins are originally in African, Asian or Latin-American countries," and may identify as Black, Lantino/a, Asian, or biracial/multi-racial (RAC, 2021). My research explores how Jews of Color experience racism in Jewish spaces, how white Jews recognize the existence of racism in Jewish spaces, and how Jewish spaces can best become actively anti-racist. To address these questions, I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews; half with self identifying Jews of Color and half with self identifying white Jews.

Literature Review:

The vast majority of the American Jewish population are Ashkenazi Jews, whose lineage can be traced back to Eastern and Central Europe. Due to the significant Ashkenazi Jewish population in the United States, most research is centered around the Ashkenazi experience, which contributes to the assumption that all Jews in the United States are white/Ashkenazi. In 2013, the Pew Research Center estimated that 2.2% of the adult American population identified as Jewish, which is approximately 5.3 million Jews (Pew, 2013). A study done in 2019 reveals that approximately 12-15% of American Jews identify as Jews of Color, suggesting that roughly 600,000-800,000 Jews of Color exist in the United States (Kelman, 2019). Although quite literally hundreds of thousands of Jews of Color exist in the U.S., a pervasive culture of Ashkenormativity still exists and thrives as the dominant representation of American Jewry. Ashkenormativity is defined by Sabina Ali as "the dominance of Ashkenazi Jewish culture,

heritage, and experiences in representing all Jewish culture, heritage, and experiences and marginalizing other forms of Jewishness, especially other Jewish heritages and components of Jewish identity," (Ali, 2020). Despite the fact that Judaism is a racially diverse culture, religion, and ethnicity, "whiteness is most often seen as the sole color associated with being Jewish in the United States" (Kim, 2012). Kim and Leavitt's research primarily studies the intersection of racial, ethnic, and religious identities among married couples where one partner is Jewish American and the other is Asian American. Several of the study's participants articulated a shared struggle of finding and forming meaningful connections with a Jewish community where they felt comfortable with their multiple identities (Kim, 2012). The Ashkenormative understanding of Jewishness and the Jewish people as exclusively white is not only false, but creates an environment for discrimination, exclusion, and racism as a result.

In her chapter, "I'm not White -- I'm Jewish. The Racial Politics of American Jews", Cheryl Greenberg reveals that many Ashkenazi Jewish Americans do not identify as white "whereas their economic and political status and their high rate of intermarriage with non-Jewish whites all reveal that they quite clearly are," (Greenberg, 2013). This is relevant, as those who benefit from white privilege have greater access to political and economic success than those who do not. Additionally, she acknowledges the presence of whiteness within the general Jewish American community due to the reality of racism within these spaces. She writes that "Jewish racism comes from Jewish whiteness in the sense that there are American Jews who do see themselves as a member of a racial group -- in the bad, racist sense -- even if they do not admit it," (Greenberg, 2013). The relationship between Jewish identity, racial identity, and their intersection is extraordinarily complicated, which has the potential to foster a Jewish environment that is not fully welcoming to everyone if not explicitly addressed In their

research examining racial boundary maintenance in white Evangelical churches, Bracey and Moore assert that despite sharing a religious identity and belief with their white counter parts, people of color experience racism and discrimination within predominantly white religious institutions (Bracey and Moore, 2017). Although their research focuses on white Evangelical churches, discriminatory race based practices in religious spaces can extend to non-Evangelical communities as well. They state that social actors such as clergy and congregants "play a central role in continuing racial segregation by executing 'race tests' on people of color,", specifically people of color who are interested in joining their religious communities (Bracey and Moore, 2017). Their research uncovers the reality that racial segregation in churches is largely due to "a process that involves institutional norms and white actors working to maintain semipermeable racial boundaries,", revealing that racial discrimination is a systemic and institutionalized practice upheld by white actors in power (Bracey and Moore, 2017). While their focus is not on Jewish spaces, the results of their research can be applied to Jewish communities. Bracey and Moore express that "whiteness, like other forms of domination, is characterized by masking power under a veil of normality," (Bracey and Moore, 2017) which directly relates to the concept of Ashkenormative culture serving as the "mainstream or normative narratives of what it means to be Jewish," (Ali, 2020).

In her Yom Kippur sermon, Rabbi Angel Buchdahl, who is a Jew of Color, states, "Jewish Peoplehood is powerful and real, but too often we misunderstand what that means. Starting with: we Jews are not a race" (Buchdahl, 2020). The presence of this argument indicates the existence of the opposing argument as well, pitting community members against one another. Jews of Color around the nation have reported experiencing racism, including microaggressions, in Jewish spaces, as well as reported receiving impertinent questions, intrusive and unwelcoming

comments among other experiences (Lawson, 2018). While Jews of Color are invisible to the "majority community *as Jews,*" they are often "very visible in their racial and ethnic differences," (Tobin, 2005). Despite these lived and vocalized experiences, "most Ashkenazi Jews do not think of themselves as racist," (Lawson, 2018).

In his chapter, "A Member of the Club? How Black Jews Negotiate Black Anti Semitism and Jewish Racism", Bruce Haynes recognizes that the "diversity of American Jews in beliefs, practices, region, custom, and national background is often noted, Jewish racial diversity is seldom recognized," (Haynes, 2013). Bridging this gap is both a crucial and mandatory step to creating Jewish communities that are built on the core Jewish values of Tikkun Olam, which directly translates into 'repairing the world', and equality. When Jews of Color are excluded, unwelcomed, or experience other forms of discrimination, they are denied the full experience of being Jewish. Whether intentional or not, exclusionary Jewish spaces are extremely harmful to the Jewish community as a whole because they perpetuate experiences of inequality and exclusion, which counters core Jewish ideals and principles.

Although some research exists, it is clear that there is a significant gap in knowledge surrounding racism in Jewish spaces. Very few works have directly addressed systemic issues of racism and discrimination experienced by Jews of Color within Jewish spaces, or how white Jews recognize and describe the existence of racism in Jewish spaces. Lastly, there is little to no research on how to create actively anti-racist Jewish spaces. Racial inequality and discrimination are not new phenomenas to the United States. However, our current political climate has once again pronounced the urgency to fight against racial injustice, and demand anti-racist ideologies and practices be implemented into all spaces, including religious ones. This research seeks to

bridge the gap in research regarding racism in Jewish communities and creating anti-racist Jewish spaces.

Methodology:

The data for this research comes from 20 semi-structured interviews, 10 with self identifying Jews of Color and 10 with self identifying white Jews. Participants were recruited through an IRB-approved graphic that was distributed onto Facebook and Instagram pages either for the general American Jewish population, or specifically for American Jews of Color. All 20 interviews were conducted over the phone between December 2020 and January 2021, and ranged from 25 minutes to an hour. The participants reside in all regions of the United States and although anyone who was between the ages of 18-30 were eligible to participate, participants ranged from 18 to 29. The age range of 18-30 was chosen to focus on the experiences of young Jewish adults.

Of the ten Jews of Color interviewed, two identified as Chinese, one identified as Black, two identified as Black and white, three identified as Chinese and white, one identified as Latina and white, and one identified as Filipino and Jewish. All ten of the white Jews interviewed self-identified as either white or Ashkenazi Jewish. While all regions of the United States were represented by participants, most participants have moved throughout the country, and their experiences reflect varying regions of the United States. Geographic location did not play a significant role in the analysis for this research, besides the unsurprising fact that levels of diversity tended to be higher in coastal regions of the country.

Each interview included prepared guiding questions that were carefully constructed in order to discover information, opinions, and personal anecdotes that uncover details to answer the original questions. These semi-structured interviews allowed me to uncover personal

experiences, which is a crucial element of this study, and assisted in effectively answering my research questions (Hesse-Biber, p. 184). I chose to conduct semi structured interviews as my method because it is one of the best methods to explore the personal experience of the targeted population. As this project involved work with human subjects, it was submitted to and approved by the KU IRB, meeting the requirements of the KU Human Subjects Committee. Because this research involved human subjects, I used the highest security drive available at The University of Kansas for research file storage for my interviews and transcripts. KU Information Technology services arranged for me to access a specialized folder within the storage space that my mentor, Sarah Deer, has secured for human subject research purposes.

Interviews were recorded and uploaded to GoTranscript, an online transcription service, and then qualitatively coded by hand using an intersectional framework for analysis. The concept of intersectionality, coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, examines the experiences of different identities when placed in relation to one another. David Schraub states that "whiteness and Jewishness in combination function in ways that are not necessarily grasped if one atomizes the identities and holds them apart" (Schraub, 2019). Similarly, non whiteness and Jewishness in combination function in ways that are not fully grasped if the identities are examined separately. The experience of being a person of color is different from the experience of being a white Jewish person, and these identities in combination produce a distinctly unique experience. An intersectional framework is a primary framework that can appropriately analyze the unique experience of Jews of color, and will be used for this project.

Several central themes were identified, such as barriers to access, levels of comfort and safety, the policing of Jewishness, the conceptualization of racism in Jewish spaces by white

Jews, and suggestions on how to create actively anti-racist Jewish spaces. This research helps to fill a gap in academic exploration of these complicated issues.

Findings:

Comfort and Safety:

One of the ways in which Jews of Color experience racism in Jewish spaces is through varying levels of comfort and safety. Several Jews of Color expressed feeling more comfortable or safe in the Jewish spaces they grew up in because they have already been accepted into the community, and their validity as Jewish people has already been established. However when these Jews of Color join a different Jewish congregation , they tend to receive more questions from fellow congregants or community members and are far more aware and cautious of their own presence. One interviewee stated that she never thought about racism in her home Jewish community, but when she left her community to go to a new one, “it is definitely something I think about because they don’t know that I’m Jewish. They don’t know my background, they don’t know me”. Similarly, another interviewee shared that she was never made to feel different because she was Asian in the Jewish community that she grew up in, but “as I got older, and I went into other spaces, I definitely noticed that people would-- notice that I looked different”. When entering a new space, Jews of Color are often forced to renegotiate and reestablish their validity as Jewish people. This was not an experience that their white counterparts expressed encountering, solidifying the fact that the renegotiation and reestablishment of their Jewish validity is usually predicated on their racial identity.

Multiple Jews of Color also expressed feeling a sense of relief and more comfortable in spaces with other Jews of Color. One participant even stated that she feels extremely nervous every time she enters a predominantly white Jewish space out of the fear that her validity and

Jewish identity will automatically come into question. Although not all of the Jews of Color participants verbalized this exact sentiment, many did share an increased sense of ease when among fellow racially diverse Jews. One interviewee mentioned that whenever she enters a new Jewish space, she is instantly on the lookout for other Asian Jews or Jews of Color. She recalled meeting another Asian Jew at an event and feeling a sense of relief because "there was someone else who could sort of get it". She also stated that creating that connection "helped me bring myself in," to become more involved with the organization. While not always the case, the presence of other Jews of Color in Jewish spaces can indicate that an organization is a place where Jews of Color are welcomed and celebrated, allowing new JOC members to let their guard down a bit. When asked what community and family meant for her in a Jewish context, a participant said, "that's always meant other Jews of Color. …the community that I felt most comfortable and not judged within was always with other Jews of Color," and she attributed part of that to the fact that other Jews of Color also have "an uneasy or complicated relationship with Judaism in a way that white Jews couldn't understand". Having fellow community members who can personally relate to the intersection of holding a racial minority identity in a Jewish space creates an environment that allows Jews of Color to embrace vulnerable parts of their identity. Without other JOC members, Jews of Color would exist in an uncomfortable space where their community members cannot fully understand a central aspect to their identity. Another participant stated that the racial diversity of her temple played an instrumental role in cementing her Jewish identity, expressing that her temple taught her that "Jews look all sorts of ways, and so that means that I am Jewish, and nobody can take that away from me". These experiences reveal that having diverse representation in Jewish spaces truly makes an exponential difference in the ways that Jews of Color feel welcomed and comfortable being present.

Another theme that emerged within the realm of varying levels of comfort and safety was the ability or inability to hide an aspect of an identity in potentially dangerous or discriminatory situations. Many white Jews that I interviewed expressed that people would not be able to tell that they were Jewish unless there was an explicitly outward expression of Jewishness. One participant explained that unless he is wearing a kippah, a religious head covering, or a Star of David necklace, then "for the most part, I'm going to be perceived as a white man, and I'm going to benefit from all of the privileges that come with that". Another participant who identified as white shared that she and her family moved to a country in the Middle East where they had to hide the fact that they are Jewish, and that "the only people who are openly Jewish there are people who have a very, very high level of protection". When asked if she felt like she and her family were able to hide their Judaism well, she answered that they were because they were able to hide any pieces of jewelry, shirts, books, etc. with Hebrew on it, and that they trained themselves to "no longer talk about our trip to Israel or Bar and Bat Mitzvahs". While this situation is the perfect example of Jews facing persecution and discrimination, it is also the perfect example of the ability to hide one's Jewishness when placed in a potentially dangerous or discriminatory situation. However, most Jews of Color are not able to hide their racial identity when placed in uncomfortable or dangerous situations. One Jew of Color interviewed stated that "people don't see that I'm Jewish, they see that I'm Black first. If I get stopped by a cop, they're not going to look at me and be, like, 'Oh, she's Jewish.' They're going to look at me as a Black person in a car". In these situations, people of color are completely unable to hide the fact that they are a person of color, especially in situations where their racial identity puts them at a higher level of risk.

The relationship that people of color, especially Black people, have with the police is an extremely complicated one due to centuries of violent police brutality. The increased police presence in Jewish spaces raises valid concerns of safety and comfort for many Jews of Color. Multiple synagogues around the United States have increased their police presence in Jewish buildings following the deadly 2018 shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, where 11 congregants were killed (McGee, 2018). One white identifying participant felt conflicted about increasing police presence at her synagogue, stating "maybe I do feel safe having a police officer here, but there's definitely people who are going to feel less safe because there's a police officer here". Another white identifying participant shared his insight on increased police presence in Jewish spaces saying "I think, unfortunately, a lot of Ashkenazi communities … have this idea of wanting to be close to authority because it makes them feel protected … but they don't consider how a Jew of Color who also goes to that synagogue is now intimidated because it's now dangerous for them to go to that synagogue simply because of the color of their skin". While Jewish people who are white may feel safer against anti-semitic attacks on their Jewish spaces by having law enforcement present, Jews of Color now have to be concerned about their safety not as a Jewish person, but as a person of color in a Jewish space. One JOC participant expressed that she becomes "really uncomfortable when I notice the cops are watching me walk to services. You guys are here to expressly protect us … but you're focused on me, a congregant? There's only one reason that could be". Issues of personal safety in the presence of the police is not something that most white Jews feel concerned about, while it is a clearly distressing situation for Jews of Color in the same space. When Jews of Color feel unsafe or unwelcomed in a particular Jewish space, it is difficult to find or even feel encouraged to find new Jewish space the way their white counterparts can.

Barriers to Access:

Another way that Jews of Color experience racism in their Jewish communities is often the inability to access expensive Jewish experiences. One theme that emerged for both Jews of Color and some white Jews were economic barriers. A JOC participant recalled attending a reunion for her Jewish summer camp and remembering that "all the kids from the Bay Area would always make fun of me for being from my hometown … I'm not from San Francisco, or from these really boujee towns in the East Bay or Scottsdale, Arizona". She expressed feeling like the reason she was mocked was due to economic differences because her hometown is a "very poor town". Another JOC interviewee expressed not feeling like a "valid Jewish person" because her family wasn't rich. She explained that she has a "really hard time relating to white Jewish folks because, like I mentioned, of all those things around institutional access that I didn't have because maybe my family couldn't have afforded it". Many young American Jews participate in a variety of Jewish activities such as summer camps, youth groups, trips to Israel, ect. These activities are expensive, and often serve as principal aspects in shaping the Jewish identity of young American Jews. When both impoverished Jews of Color and white Jews cannot afford these activities, there is an immediate barrier to access, and it is significantly more difficult to connect to the majority Jews within a community who did have these opportunities.

Multiple JOC participants described feeling like they had to choose between their intersecting identities, or felt like they had to constantly negotiate one identity over the other. One interviewee expressed feeling like "people don't see me as Asian, for the most part. They're like, 'Oh, well, you're Asian but you're not really Asian,' and I feel like I have to go along with that in order for people to see me as Jewish". Multiple Jews of Color shared the experience of having the racial component of their identity minimized and redefined by their white Jewish

community. When Jews of Color feel forced to minimize their non-white racial identity in order to feel accepted, they also feel compelled to disregard a fundamental part of themselves to fully participate in Jewish life. Not only do Jews of Color feel alienated in Jewish spaces, but they also feel alienated from other non-Jewish spaces.

One JOC participant explained that she doesn't feel drawn to participate in her Hispanic community because she doesn't want to "feel like I'm being outcasted … or explain why I'm there" because her Hispanic community doesn't see her as fully Hispanic due to her Ashkenazi Jewish side. Another JOC participant expressed a similar emotion because "in Jewish spaces, I always felt like I was more Chinese, and in Chinese spaces I always felt like I was more Jewish… I'm either in Jewish mode or I'm in Chinese mode". These experiences indicate that it is common for Jews of Color to feel disconnected from both their Jewish and racial identities, leaving them in ambiguous spaces where they are not sure where they are fully accepted. One JOC mentioned that it was not because they "personally felt there was a lack of harmony between my identities, but people made it seem like I could only be one". Having to choose between identities acts as a barrier to access because it is extremely challenging to be in a space where it feels like community members are not willing to accept all parts of an identity, even if they cannot personally relate or understand.

Several Jews of Color described pulling away from Jewish spaces due to racist incidents, but then feeling uncomfortable or unable to rejoin Jewish spaces out of fear of being judged or questioned for not knowing things that they missed while recuperating from overt racist experiences. One JOC interviewee recalled being called the "Great Wall" at his Jewish summer camp, and even waking up with "Made in China" written on the bottom of his foot. He stated "I stopped going to that camp well before I aged out. I previously thought that it was the best place

on earth, and I was going to obviously go there right up until they physically take me out. I stopped going there because I found other summer activities that didn't initially write 'Made in China' on my foot". This is a very clear example of overt racism that Jews of Color experience in predominantly white Jewish spaces. When racism occurs in a Jewish space, it fosters an environment that discourages Jews of Color from feeling welcomed, and many withdraw in order to protect their well being. However by disassociating themselves from their Jewish spaces, Jews of Color are consequently unable to participate and form meaningful relationships within Jewish communities. Another JOC participant recalled getting into an argument about anti-semitism with a white Jewish person on her college campus, which resulted in the other person making inappropriate comments about the events of the George Floyd protests. After that incident, she explained that she hasn't "gone to a Jewish service from my college since. … I don't want to go. When you have those kind of experiences or you're constantly around people that write off anti-Semitism as something only white Jews have ever experienced, it's impossible to try to be around them. … then if you do get upset, you get the angry Black woman trope thrown in your face". When Jews of Color are pushed out of their Jewish spaces due to racism, but then unable to return out of fear of judgement, questioning, or criticism, a cycle of exclusion transpires. This cycle of exclusion acts as a barrier to access for Jews of Color because it is challenging to want to access spaces where racist comments or experiences are common.

Policing and Gatekeeping of Jewishness

Another prominent theme that emerged from the interviews is the "policing" of Jewishness for both Jews of Color and white Jews. While Jews of Color and White Jews have their Jewishness policed for different reasons, the prominence and normalization of this policing cultivates exclusionary Jewish spaces. Several Jews of Color participants described experiences

of other people deciding or quantifying their Jewishness to their faces. One JOC stated that people have debated her validity as a Jewish person because her mom isn't Jewish, which is an argument that many Jewish people hear due to the conservative rabbinic law that a person can only be Jewish if their mother is as well (Cohen, 2009). Similarly, other JOC participants explained that people have made statements along the lines of 'that doesn't count,' or, 'that makes sense,' when they reveal that one parent is a person of color or only one parent identifies as Jewish. These microaggressions create an artificial hierarchy, allowing white Jews to sit in judgment and police and define the identities of their JOC community members.

Another way that Jewishness is policed is through the perceived image of what a Jewish person looks like. During interviews, I asked both Jews of Color and white Jews to imagine a Jewish person in their mind, and describe what that person looked like without thinking too much about it. One JOC participant answered that she usually imagines a white person with curly brown hair, following up with "I hate having a preconceived notion of how someone will look, especially if they're Jewish, because I don't look like that". Multiple interviewees attributed part of this association to the Jewish representation in the media, "maybe if you've never met someone who was Jewish … you would pretty much just think of Jews as white people like in the media. To most non-Jewish folks of color that I knew, being Jewish and being white wasn't really different". There is minimal JOC representation in popular culture, which contributes to the conceptualization of Jewish people as almost exclusively white. This false and limited initial perception of all Jewish people as white was something that white participants described as well. One white participant expressed that her initial thought was "someone who looks like me, so I would just assume a white person, brown hair, brown eyes". Multiple white participants described imagining other Jewish people to look similar to themselves or their family members,

but also feeling guilty for buying into the media's inaccurate portrayal of Jewish physical features. When asked to recall a time when she was surprised to learn that someone was Jewish, one white participant shared that she was surprised to learn that the Black actress, Tiffany Haddish, is Jewish. She attributed her surprise to the fact that Haddish "doesn't look like the Hollywood portrayal of Jewish". When people, Jewish or not, have this preconceived notion of what a Jewish person looks like, it polices what a Jewish person 'should be', and automatically excludes Jews of Color from the understanding of Jewish people in the United States.

Several of the Jews of Color I interviewed expressed feeling like they had to explain their entire life story to strangers, and that strangers felt entitled to their life story in order to fully understand how they came to be Jewish. Multiple Jews of Color stated that they often tell people their background without being asked in order to avoid the inevitable intrusive questions from strangers. One JOC participant said "instead of having to wait for them to think, I just give them all the information so that we get it out of the way faster". The experience of being questioned about exactly how they are Jewish was one that was shared by multiple of the Jews of Color that were interviewed. Many JOCs reported being asked blatantly how they are Jewish, as if it is impossible or preposterous that they could ever just be born as a Jewish person.

The question of "how" they are Jewish was also asked in more inconspicuous ways, such as asking if they had a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, is their mother Jewish, were they adopted, did they convert, if they have ever been to Israel, etc. One JOC stated that these moments are "not so much a question, but this whole conversation on our family history", reiterating the feeling that in order to feel fully accepted into a Jewish space, Jews of Color often feel like they have to reveal intimate parts of themselves with people who are otherwise strangers. One Jew of Color felt especially frustrated and invalidated when people asked her to detail her Jewish background

"because I was raised Jewish, that is all I know. … My first public event was being in a synagogue, at like two months old, so I've done nothing but be Jewish". Being Jewish is a deep and integral part of the identities of many Jews of Color, and Jewish spaces are policed when Jews of Color are constantly asked exactly how they are Jewish, or feel like they have to justify their presence in a place that is supposed to feel like an accepting community. These are questions that are usually asked of strangers, making JOCs feel like they are being policed as a perpetual stranger within their own community.

When any Jewish person reveals that they are Jewish in a new setting, it is not uncommon for others to ask questions. However, many Jews of Color reported feeling like they were being interrogated, or felt like those who were asking the questions had a sense of skepticism because of their race. This was especially true when the questions were coming from white Jews. One JOC participant revealed that they felt like "Jewish people are much more hyper-critical of who is Jewish, and who isn't," as opposed to non-Jewish people. While Jews of Color are routinely questioned about their Jewish background by other Jews, several JOC participants stated that non-Jewish people were less critical of their intersecting identities. These participants felt that white Jewish people asked more questions about *how* they are Jewish, and that non-Jewish people had more questions about Jewishness as a whole instead of the intersections of their Jewish and racial identity. One JOC participant articulated this by stating "the non-Jews are way more focused on the fact that I'm Jewish. The Jews are more focused on my race".

Even if it is abundantly clear that they are Jewish, Jews of Color are still questioned about how they are Jewish or if they actually Jewish, especially by white Jewish community members. One JOC participant recalled attending a conference specifically for members of

Jewish organizations and receiving countless racial microaggressions. He stated "about half of the tables I went to were run by Jewish organizations, led by people who were representatives of large Jewish organizations … would ask me, 'Oh, are you one of the non-Jewish guys?'". None of his white friends that he attended the conference with were asked these questions or assumed to be not Jewish, yet he was because of his racial identity. This aligns with the patterns of the white Jews that I interviewed, as almost all reported positive engagements and questions when talking about their Jewishness by both Jewish and non Jewish people. One white participant said that their "Jewish identity has never been questioned about whether or not I was Jewish … I think it all comes from a genuine place of curiosity and wanting to engage and learn. I have definitely never felt that it's been a targeted or demeaning engagement,". However, this is not a sentiment that many Jews of Color can share. Another white participant stated that "when I'm in a Jewish space, people don't really question me, especially an Ashkenazi Jewish space," further revealing the racially driven components to the questions that Jews of Color receive in Jewish spaces. These experiences uncover the fact that Jews of Color are usually questioned about *how* they are Jewish or if they are *actually* Jewish, while white Jews usually receive questions about Judaism as a religion or no questions at all. Being unable to exist as a Jewish person without answering countless invasive questions leads to Jews of Color feeling like they are being policed and regulated in a space that acts as a safe and welcoming community to everyone else.

Conceptualization of Racism in Jewish Spaces by White Jews

During the interviews with white Jewish participants, I asked each of them whether they see or have seen problems with racism or microaggressions in the Jewish spaces that they inhabit. While two participants responded that they have not personally witnessed racism or microaggressions, all ten white Jewish participants agreed that there are issues with racism and

microaggressions in their Jewish spaces and Jewish spaces as a whole. One theme that emerged was the acknowledgement that while some Jewish spaces have worked to be inclusive and increase inclusivity, most are not actively anti-racist. Inclusivity welcomes everyone, regardless of differences and varying backgrounds and experiences. Anti-racism welcomes everyone while acknowledging the differences in lived experiences among community members due to systems of oppression. Anti-racist environments work to acknowledge the damage done by powerful systems of oppression while simultaneously working to create an environment built on values of equity and justice. Although cultivating an inclusive and welcoming environment is an important aspect of a successful organization, it is not the same as "looking inward to acknowledge racial bias that shows up within our own policies and culture," and acknowledging the deep rooted systematic racism that prevents a truly just and equitable world (McSwain, 2019).

One JOC participant expressed her frustration that inclusive is often conflated with anti-racist, stating that the diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in her Jewish space are " a bunch of white people sitting in a room saying, 'racism is bad,' because they don't have any Black people in the synagogue," and this this was especially aggravating to her because "you can't have an anti-racism task force of all rich white people". Multiple participants stated that while the framework and foundation to become an anti-racist space/organization are often present, the steps to take it to the next level have not occurred. One white participant shared that while she felt like her Jewish space "went out of their way to make sure everyone felt welcome … I don't think that they were necessarily taking any measures to actively be anti-racist and do that work". Another white participant communicated that she felt as if "synagogues are saying the right thing," but couldn't explicitly identify what active work was being done on that front. Most of the white Jews who were interviewed recognize the existence of racism within their

Jewish spaces, and understand the importance of becoming an actively anti-racist Jewish space instead of simply an inclusive and welcoming one.

A common trope among some white Jews is that they cannot be both white and Jewish. The issue of considering Jewishness a race is a complicated one, with deep nuance and contested opinions. This research does not dive into the nuance and complicated history of Jewishness as a race, and other research should seek to address these complex details. In the interviews, I asked both Jews of Color and white Jews how the argument 'Jews are not white' or 'I'm not white, I'm Jewish' made them feel. This question was particularly in reference to Jews who function as white within American society, yet still make the argument that because they are Jewish, they are not white. While the responses ranged from apathetic to passionate, a significant portion of both white and JOC interviewees felt strongly against white Jews who do not see themselves as white people, feeling as if it is an excuse to remove themselves from white privilege and incidents of racism. A JOC participant shared that she feels like when white Jews do not see themselves as white, they therefore also do not see themselves as part of the problem. This same participant expressed her frustration with her white Jewish family during the protests following the murder of George Floyd in June 2020, after they had repeatedly tried to remove themselves from their whiteness. To her, it felt like her family got to watch the protests as if they were "a spectator sport. You have enough privilege to not feel the need to be there … You can remove yourself from the situation, and that's because you're white, not because you're Jewish". Similarly, a white participant stated that prior to the events of this summer, he was more sympathetic to the opinions of those who do not identify as white due to their Jewish identity. However, now he feels like "in many ways the argument is trying to juxtapose the experience of being Jewish, not white, with the experience of being Black or Latinx in the country. I think it's a false

equivalency". While Jewishness and racial identity have their intersections, they are still two different identities. When white Jewish recognize that removing themselves from whiteness and white privilege is problematic, it shows that they are able to conceptualize it as the microaggression it is.

Every white Jew interviewed expressed an interest in learning more about Jews of Color and wanting to find ways to create equitable, inclusive, and anti-racist spaces. One participant stated that she is fully aware that Jews of Color are "out there and we just haven't provided that space for them to feel comfortable in our community". This was a perspective that multiple white participants shared while recognizing the inherent racism behind not creating space for Jews of Color in their communities. There is also a fine line between creating space for Jews of Color, and tokenizing Jews of Color by using them as a marketing tool. One white participant revealed that she has witnessed her JOC friends fall victim as "targets for marketing campaigns, where they're asked to speak only about their race and nothing about what their Jewish identity means to them. They're only used as a puppet for marketing". She expressed feeling like these instances were entirely "unfair and unforgiving to who they are as Jewish people" because the only space that was created for them was used to benefit the Jewish space, not the Jews of Color.

When asked what a diverse Jewish space looked like to her, a white participant replied "this is always something that I struggle to answer because I've never been in one … through quarantine, I spent so much time in online Jewish spaces and learned so much about Sephardi and Mizrahi, but also Ethiopian Jews that I didn't even really know existed until a few months ago". She was not alone in the sentiment that far too many Jewish spaces do not provide the education and resources to create both inclusive and anti-racist communities. By not having

fundamental tools such as educational resources, Jewish spaces do not have the ability to equitably create space for Jews of Color, excluding JOCs from their communities.

Anti-Racist Jewish Spaces

On top of addressing the issues of comfort and safety, barriers to access, and the policing of Jewishness, there are several other initiatives Jewish spaces can implement in order to become actively anti-racist. At the end of the interview with each JOC, I asked what their Jewish spaces could do better in order to best represent them and practice anti-racism; thus the majority of these suggestions come directly from Jews of Color. The first recommendation is to increase and normalize diverse representation of Jewish people both in Jewish spaces and in popular culture. One JOC participant stated that she was raised in an extremely racially diverse Jewish space, which was the foundation of her Jewish experience and provided her with the environment to authentically embrace all parts of her identity. This is a perfect example of the positive impacts of representing the diversity within Jewishness. Similarly, another JOC participant suggested that Jewish spaces prioritize "recognizing that the Jewish diaspora is a multiracial one, even outside of the construct of American Jewry … At a very basic level, Jewish just exists across races, across racial boundaries of the United States. Jews are a global diaspora," while simultaneously acknowledging "that the idea of Jewishness as a predominantly white construct, is in fact a construct. It's not real". When Jewish spaces recognize, appreciate, and represent the vast diversity of the Jewish people, they are concurrently implementing anti-racist practices. Another suggestion is to represent and talk about Jews of Color in a "more complex way". If Jews of Color are reduced to a single story of conversion, adoption, or other unwarranted assumptions, it confines the diverse experiences of Jews of Color into a one dimensional narrative. Doing this perpetuates racist stereotypes of similarities between all people of color. It is crucial that the

diversity of the Jewish people is reflected in our communities and popular culture to ensure that everyone is seen and recognized.

Another prominent suggestion is to engage in difficult conversations, ask questions, and practice cultural humility. Many JOC participants expressed that they did not feel that racism and racial injustice were ever discussed in their Jewish spaces outside of a religious context. A fantastic first step to increasing anti-racist practices is to have tough conversations, despite the inevitable discomfort that will arise. A JOC participant shared that without taking the basic step of engaging in conversations surrounding race and racism, it is impossible to know how to even "navigate those situations,". He continued by suggesting that Jewish spaces should talk about "some of the things you should and should not say to a JOC," as well as "some of the things you should and should and should not do if you want JOCs to feel welcome in Jewish spaces". By not discussing these things, Jewish spaces are complicit in the pain and discomfort experienced by their JOC members, and become a part of the problem. Another JOC participant recommended that individuals and organizations look inward to recognize their own personal bias and contributions to racism, which is an essential step in creating anti-racist spaces. She suggested starting by "acknowledging the racism and privilege that exists within our synagogues … Something I love about Judaism is you're supposed to ask questions. It is part of Judaism to be asking questions and learning,". Some of the questions she posed included: "Why aren't we challenging racial narratives? Why aren't we challenging racist outlooks? … Why did our synagogues white flight out of the urban core? Why am I the only Black person out of 4,000 people in this synagogue?". Although it is extremely uncomfortable to reflect internally to acknowledge an individual's contribution to racism, it is an imperative step in combating inequity and practicing anti-racism. One white participant shared that if her Jewish space feels

that they are going to “continue to do Tikkun Olam and work with community partners, we really have to do some deep hard work ourselves”. The process of creating anti-racist and equitable spaces is as much about community involvement as it is personal involvement, but both are key components to the operation.

An essential function in recognizing personal bias is being willing to actively encourage JOC community members to raise concerns or problems when they occur, and to be open to constructive criticism. One JOC conceptualized this by saying “I think it's just a matter of creating or giving people the option to feel like they can say there's a problem,”. The process of creating anti-racist Jewish spaces becomes entirely meritless if it is not met with the enthusiastic desire to take actionable steps, starting with listening to Jews of Color “when we want to tell you our experiences, and pay us for what we tell you,”. This is necessary because it is “tokenizing when groups that don't already have a deep investment and vision around racial justice bring in one Jew of Color,” to speak as the sole representative and solve deeply systematic issues. Internal reflection needs to come before asking “any Jew of Color their opinion for free … Every single white professional in this community has to be doing that work of confronting,” their own personal biases. Having conversations about racism in your own communities, and how individuals personally contribute and benefit from racist practices is not easy. It is not supposed to feel comfortable, but it is imperative to have these conversations, sit and reflect upon the inevitable discomfort that arises, and actively listen as allies in order to build equitable and anti-racist spaces.

Lastly, Jewish communities need to reorient and re-envision Jewish spaces by sincerely investing in Jews of Color membership and leadership. The majority of Jewish spaces described in all 20 interviews do not serve the interests of JOCs, which in turn does not work in the best

interests of the Jewish community as a whole. One suggestion is to drastically shift the way that many Jewish spaces approach programming surrounding Tikkun Olam and social justice. Having "more long term programming,", such as a long term committed partnership with a social justice organization, not only benefits community members by providing ongoing education and resources, but demonstrates genuine dedication to the work. Another example is "reorienting organizations in a way that they're designed to support leadership of Jews of Color," which includes compensating Jews of Color when they are asked to perform diversity work, provide appropriate support systems, ensure that boundaries are respected, and take safety measures to protect the mental, emotional, and physical safety of Jews of Color. In order to create actively anti-racist Jewish spaces, these spaces need to emotionally and financially invest in their JOC members. It is performative and disrespectful when any space or organization claims that diversity and anti-racist work is crucial to them, yet the "money doesn't follow, the staff time doesn't follow, and the training doesn't follow".

Investing in JOC leadership is another necessary step in reorienting Jewish spaces to become anti-racist. The Jewish people are incredibly diverse, and it's time that Jewish spaces reflect the diversity of the larger community. Jews of Color need to be centered in leadership positions, otherwise white Jewish leaders, who cannot personally understand the experience of what it is like as a Jew of Color, are making decisions on behalf of Jews of Color instead of giving JOCs the opportunity to. A white participant shared that her synagogue has been in the process of doing "an internal audit … we're looking at the processes for hiring for example, or how we do our budgeting, or how our board nominations are done". Taking actions like this go hand in hand with personal reflection by using it as ways to increase just and equitable internal practices and increase JOC leadership. If there is minimal JOC representation in the community

or in leadership positions, it is time to reflect on why that is harmful and how to be better going forward. Jews of Color are present and dedicated in the Jewish community, and it is time to demand that Jewish spaces act on the core Jewish value of Tikkun Olam by practicing anti-racism.

Conclusion:

While the focus of this research was how Jews of Color experience racism in Jewish spaces, how white Jews recognize the existence of racism in Jewish spaces, and how Jewish spaces can best become actively anti-racist, further research is necessary. Potential further research should address the origins of the trope that one cannot be both white and Jewish, while exploring the complexities and nuances of considering Jewishness as a race. Other potential further research should address how the experiences of Jews of Color and the Jewish community as a whole changes as a result of actively anti-racist Jewish spaces. Limitations to this research included number of participants, majority female participants, participants that skewed on the younger side of the age requirement, differing racial identities, and not many participants who identified as conservative or Orthodox. Future research should seek to address these limitations.

Although Jewish identity in the United States has largely been dominated and defined by Ashkenormativity, Jews of Color make up a significant and vital portion of the American Jewish population. The battle of recognition and representation between Jews of Color and the dominating assumption of Jewish whiteness in the United States often produces an environment of racism and exclusion for Jewish community members of color. Due to the intersection of their non-white racial identity and Jewish identity, Jews of Color experience barriers of access to Jewish spaces, different and often lower levels of comfort and safety in predominately white

Jewish spaces, and have their Jewish identity policed and gate kept in ways that their white Jewish counterparts do not. Regardless of intention, the impact of overt racism and microaggressions cultivates exclusionary Jewish spaces, countering the core Jewish ideals and principles of Tikkun Olam and social justice. This research also revealed that while white Jews cannot personally understand or relate to the experiences of Jews of Color, many of them do recognize that there are issues with racism and microaggressions in their Jewish spaces and Jewish spaces as a whole. Recognizing that racism exists and is an important issue within Jewish spaces is the first step in creating actively anti-racist Jewish spaces. The Jews of Color interviewed made a variety of suggestions towards designing anti-racist spaces, including increasing representation, engaging in difficult conversations, actively seeking to further educate oneself, and reorienting Jewish spaces to center and uplift Jews of Color. The Jewish people are incredibly diverse, and it's time that Jewish spaces reflect the diversity of the larger community and celebrate Jews of Color.

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Appendix 1

Demographic questions:

- Age
- Location
- Education
- Occupation
- How do you describe your race?
- Sexual orientation/gender identity?

Jews of Color Questions:

1. Have you ever experienced racism/microaggressions in Jewish spaces? When and where? Have these experiences affected how you feel welcomed/included into Jewish spaces? Can you provide some examples of racism that you've experienced in Jewish spaces?
2. When someone says "Jewish person", how do you imagine them in your mind?
3. Do you feel like you have to minimize one part of your identity in order to feel fully accepted into the other?
4. What could your Jewish spaces be doing better in order to represent you and other diverse identities in Judaism?
5. What kind of reactions do you get from white Jews when you tell them you're Jewish? What kind of reactions do you get from non-Jews when you tell them that you're Jewish?
    a. What kind of questions do you get?
6. What does tikkun olam and mishpacha mean for you
7. How does the argument of 'Jews are not white' make you feel?

8. Has your Jewishness ever been questioned/challenged, and what was the basis of that challenge?
9. How are you and the Jewish spaces you're a part of inclusive/anti-racist? Is it something that you've thought about?
10. Tell me about your synagogue/temple growing up. Where was it, what denomination, what kind of people went there, what sorts of programs did you have?

White Jews Questions:

1. What does a diverse Jewish space look like to you?
2. Do you see problems with racism/microaggressions in the Jewish spaces that you inhabit?
3. When someone says "Jewish person", how do you imagine them in your mind?
4. Has your Jewishness ever been challenged/questioned, and what was the basis of that challenge?
5. How do people react when you tell them you're Jewish? What kind of questions do you get?
6. What does tikkun olam and mishpacha mean for you?
7. Tell me about your synagogue/temple growing up. Where was it, what denomination, what kind of people went there, what sorts of programs did you have?
8. How does the argument of 'Jews are not white' make you feel?
9. How are you and the Jewish spaces you're a part of inclusive/anti-racist? Is it something that you've thought about?
10. Tell me about a time you were surprised when someone told you they were Jewish. Why were you surprised?

Appendix 2


CALLING JEWS OF COLOR AND WHITE/WHITE PRESENTING JEWS
RESEARCH
TO UNDERSTAND HOW RACISM EXISTS IN JEWISH SPACES, AND HOW TO BECOME ANTI-RACIST
REQUIREMENTS
SELF-IDENTIFYING JEWS OF COLOR AND WHITE/WHITE PRESENTING JEWS
AGES 18-30
45-60 MINUTE INTERVIEW
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