



# **I'm Not White, I'm Jewish: Standing as Jews in the Fight for Racial Justice<sup>1</sup>**

**by Paul Kivel**

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**I MUST ADMIT THAT I HAD SOME HESITATION** over accepting the invitation to participate in a conference on whiteness because, as an activist, I am skeptical about the usefulness of academic gatherings unless they are explicitly addressing grassroots community issues. I need to state at the beginning that I am writing this article because I hope this process contributes to ending racism and anti-Semitism. For me, the only reason to talk about these issues is to guide our action. I come from a long Jewish tradition of using words and our intellectual tools and tradition as a guide for survival, struggle and liberation.

My fear about academic discussion being divorced from real world affairs was proven by the conference itself. The conference occurred during a respite from the threat of a further bombing of Iraq, although the war continues through the economic sanctions. Every day hundreds of people, mostly children, die from lack of food and medical supplies. The local context for the conference was the daily attacks and raids on immigrant communities occurring just outside of the Riverside campus. Both of these situations are a direct result of institutional racism but were rarely even mentioned during the course of the conference.

The title of my article comes from a story I relate in my book, *Uprooting Racism*.

A colleague and I were doing a workshop on racism and we wanted to divide the group into a caucus of people of color and a caucus of white people, so that each group could have more in-depth discussion. Immediately some of the white people said, "But I'm not white."

I was somewhat taken aback because although these people looked white they were clearly distressed about being labeled white. A white, Christian woman stood up and said, "I'm not really white

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because I'm not part of the white male power structure that perpetuates racism." Next a white gay man stood up and said, "You have to be straight to have the privileges of being white." A white, straight, working class man from a poor family then said, "I've got it just as hard as any person of color." Finally a straight, white middle class man said, "I'm not white, I'm Italian."

My African-American co-worker turned to me and asked, "Where are all the white people who were here just a minute ago?" Of course I replied, "Don't ask me, I'm not white, I'm Jewish!"

With a little analysis we can see how each of these "I'm not white" people in reality benefits a great deal from white skin privilege including better schools, better jobs, better housing and better police protection than people of color.

What is disturbing about this story is not the ignorance, denial and confusion that those of us who are white feel about being white—but how paralyzing this confusion becomes when we're needed by people of color to be allies of theirs. How can we be effective allies when we are stuck trying to sort out whether and in what ways we are white? I guess this question could, in fact, characterize the dilemma of the conference and of all of us who were participants. How can we be effective allies to people of color in the fight to end racism when we are focused on the meaning of whiteness?

If our examination of the meaning of whiteness leads to deeper understanding of racism and more effective strategies for combating it then we will have taken a step forward. But it will be neither simple nor easy to do so.

We come to this confusion because of the history of anti-Semitism and racism and the ways to which white Christian ruling classes have used these to divide, confuse and exploit us.

To some extent my gut-level response as a Jew is similar to the "I'm not white" response of other white people. When the subject is racism nobody wants to be white, because being white has been labeled "bad" and brings up feelings of guilt, shame, complicity and hopelessness.

At this point I have to stop and clarify the fact that I am a European descended Jew, what we call Ashkenazi. Ashkenazi Jews are the dominant cultural group in the Jewish communities of the United States and Israel, holding the political and economic power within those communities. Jews of color make up the majority of



Jews in the world, as well as in Israel, but are largely invisible and exploited both here and in Israel. As a “white” Jew, I have the privilege of grappling with this question in ways that Jews of Arab, Spanish, Black, South Asian or other heritages cannot because they are never accepted as white either in Jewish or in mainstream society.

But it is even more confusing than that. Anti-Semitism is similar to, different from, and intertwined with racism. Ruling elites holding political power in Europe have exploited, controlled and violated other groups of people based on religion, race, culture and nationality, as well as gender, class and sexual orientation, for hundreds of years. There is tremendous overlap in the kinds of violence that have been directed at these groups and the kinds of justifications used to legitimize them. Racism and anti-Semitism are two primary, closely related tools that ruling elites have used to maintain their advantage.

What is important to understand is that the history of justification of racism predates race as a category. In early Western European history the Christian church had tremendous power, including the power to determine the terms used to justify what occurred in the world. Ruling elites used religious language to justify their policies. People who were colonized or otherwise exploited were labeled heathens, infidels, pagans, witches or simply as Godless. I have heard someone say recently that whiteness is a fairly recent phenomenon and that Swedes, Germans, English and French did not sit around in Europe and try to decide whether or not they were white. This only became of concern when they arrived in the United States. I would agree but contend that they did sit around and try to decide who was Christian or not—and they killed those who weren’t. The Spanish Inquisition even had a one-drop rule. No one could be a pure-blooded Christian if they had even one drop of Jewish blood within the previous three generations.

With the rise of science as an important cultural force, including its status to explain the world, religious explanations became less influential and scientific ones more so. It was only at this time that race as a pseudo-scientific category was created and infinitely adjusted to explain domination and exploitation. Obviously religious explanations did not disappear, but this period marked the advent of scientific racism, categorization of peoples based on skin color, genetics and other “natural” qualities.

In the twentieth century as scientific explanations of racial difference became discredited we have seen the use of historical, sociological and psychological theories to justify and explain



systems of oppression. The very fact of so many different kinds of explanations undermines the legitimacy of all of them. Different groups rely on different justifications, but the Christian basis for racism still carries tremendous force. Therefore we all need to pay a lot more attention to the Christian roots and current underpinnings of white racism. I believe that Jews have an important role to play in helping us focus on these issues.

This historical development contributes to the reasons for my “I’m not white” response which have to do with the particularities of being Jewish. To understand them is to understand some of the complexities of being Jewish and of the ways racism and anti-Semitism operate as systems of power and domination.

When I say “I’m not white,” most white people, i.e. most white Christians, would agree with me. When white Christians say “white” they don’t mean me, they mean white Christians. All Jews are non-white by this definition and we have the scars to prove it. White Christians have considered us outsiders, outcasts, contaminating factors (along with the Roma, the mentally challenged, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and all people of color), and this has been as true of lay people as of those in power. We have been considered a threat to Christians because we rejected Jesus as the son of God, because we were falsely accused of killing him, and we are still considered to be an obstacle to Jesus’ second coming. Part of my “I’m not white” response is recognition that I can even say I am white and I still won’t be accepted by or any safer from oppression from mainstream white Christian culture.

On the other hand, when I say I’m not white most people of color, including Jews of color, would disagree with me. They would say that I look white, I’m mostly treated as white, and I enjoy many of the benefits of being white including better education, better housing, and better jobs than people of color. And they are right. As a European descended Jew, I do enjoy these benefits.

I am white in the sense that my particular Jewish ancestors lived in Europe for nearly a thousand years before coming to the United States. During that time we assimilated a tremendous amount of European culture in order to survive. We have learned how to adapt, camouflage, assimilate, sabotage, resist, and undermine some of that culture. During that entire time we have never been safe from spontaneous and systematic violence and exploitation. Sometimes we have even had to exploit other people in order to stay alive, or to be allowed to stay in a place we had lived for hundreds of years. And sometimes we have come to believe the



lies of racism, the justifications for economic and cultural exploitation that European culture is built on.

It is true that those of us who come from European backgrounds and could reasonably pass for white were granted conditional acceptance in this society just as many other European groups were.

There were two conditions for being accepted as white. First, we had to assimilate and act white, giving up our languages, cultures, foods, rituals, beliefs, and other parts of our heritage. Second, we had to buy into and reinforce racism. In exchange for education, housing and jobs we had to agree to use our new found status to reinforce and perpetuate racism against people of color.

European Jews have done this at the expense not only of people of color and our own culture, but with a devastating impact on Jews of color. There are deep and devastating divisions, often not even acknowledged, within the Jewish community because of the impact of racism on Jews of color. This has given Ashkenazi Jews the power to define Jewish culture in the United States and in Israel, which renders invisible Jews of color and subjects them to exploitation even within the Jewish community. It has also created the impression that racism is a problem for non-Jews, a problem outside the Jewish community. Racism is not an issue out there for Jews, but one which is within our own Jewish communities.

In whose interest is this exploitation and confusion?

I'd like you to imagine a pyramid and that pyramid will represent 100% of the population of the United States. At the very top of this pyramid imagine a tiny area, 1% of the pyramid representing 1% or 1/100th of the population. These people control 47% of the net financial wealth of the richest country in the world. The net worth of each household in this group is over \$2,000,000, and the annual income is over \$373,000 per year.

Now imagine a portion of the pyramid below this very top-most section that represents 19% of the population. This next 19% controls another 44% of the wealth of the country. The average net worth of each household is \$344,000, and the average household income is over \$94,000. What this amounts to is that the top 20% controls 91% of the wealth of the country.

Now if you imagine the rest of the pyramid—80%—we get to divide up the leftovers, the remaining 9% of this country's wealth. This leaves us with a net worth on average of \$44,000 and an



average income of \$23,000. In fact there is a sizable segment of the population that would actually be below the pyramid entirely, with a negative net worth. This is one of the greatest concentrations of wealth that we know of among a ruling class at any time in the history of the world. Although anti-Semitic stereotypes would have us believe there are many Jews at the top of the pyramid, a careful look at the distribution of wealth and at political and corporate leaders in this country would reveal few Jews. Those at the top are primarily white and primarily Christian.

There are a couple of things we should note about this system. One is that people of color are mostly at the bottom of the pyramid. But there are also lots of white people at the bottom. To keep poor and working class white people near the bottom from establishing relationships of resistance with people of color, white people are constantly given the impression that they are in danger, in danger from people of color below them who will take away their jobs and anything else they have, and in danger from Jews above them who will exploit and control them. This makes many poor and working class whites feel squeezed between Jews and people of color. Stereotypes of Jewish bankers and welfare mothers feed these fears and are part of a common economic strategy that intertwines racism and anti-Semitism.

The second thing to notice is that racism works by keeping people of color the center of attention and white Christians the center of power. Whenever there is national discussion of any issue we are encouraged to focus on people of color rather than on the economic and political leaders who are making the decisions that most affect our lives. If we happen to look up towards the centers of power we are encouraged to see Jews more visibly than white Christians so that our attention never quite focuses on the white Christian leadership of our government and corporations.

In this situation no one is safe because protection is conditional. The ruling class offers safe haven, economic success, voting rights, tolerance and even status as honorary whites such as it has to Jews, Asian Americans or other groups when support is needed. And then quickly withdraws those benefits and protection, setting up the wrath of the rest of the populace, when scapegoats and a diversion are needed.

So what do we do to respond to this complicated set of circumstances? If we as Jews work against racism, but poor and working class whites and people of color continue to attack Jews as the common source of their problems, we have increased the risk to ourselves and done nothing to attack the economic roots of





injustice in this country. Therefore we can only work effectively against racism if anti-Semitism is on the agenda as well.

As Jews we must:

- a. Identify and attack racism within the Jewish community, both against people of color in general, and against Jews of color in particular.
- b. Work in solidarity with people of color, but not at the expense of our own safety.
- c. Use whatever contingent status and resources we have as whites to combat racism.
- d. Be visible as Jews and combat anti-Semitism which helps reveal racism and its Christian underpinning.
- e. Work in broad coalition to disperse political, economic and social power to all people, and create a democratic, anti-racist and secular multicultural state.

Non-Jews need to know that as a Jew, I participate in the struggle against racism as part of my identity and in fighting for justice, equality, the end of exploitation, and for my personal and group safety. My greatest effectiveness as an ally to people of color comes from my history and experience as a Jew.

I want to give some brief examples of where the kind of coalition politics I am referring to is being attempted by Jews:

Jews for Racial and Economic Justice in New York, which is working on labor organizing and immigrant issues in the Asian community;

The Jewish Council on Urban Affairs in Chicago, which is doing education and organizing around housing and economic justice issues;

The Progressive Jewish Alliance in Los Angeles and in the San Francisco Bay Area, which is connecting individuals Jews and Jewish congregations to grassroots struggles for worker and immigrant rights;

and Jews of color throughout the country are working to reclaim their cultures and to establish recognition, autonomy and participation within the Jewish community.

These are examples of not letting the confusion around the question of identity and whether some Jews are white or not divert us from the goal of ending racism and anti-Semitism. These are examples of using identity as a platform for social action.



Another example is a group I am part of in Northern California called Angry White Guys for Affirmative Action. Here again we used our identity, in this case as white males, as a tool for political action to address the white community. We used our title to challenge the ways that groups of people are pitted against each other by stating clearly that we refused to buy into the traditional roles that white men have been assigned to play in our racial, gender, and economic hierarchy.

The conclusions I draw from these examples is that we must not let intellectual fascination with these issues distract us from being active. We must understand the complexities of how racism and anti-Semitism work without becoming paralyzed by our understanding. We can acknowledge the depths of feelings we have about these issues without becoming paralyzed by our feelings. We can join the vast numbers of white people, including untold numbers of Jews, who have always fought for racial justice.

In conclusion, I want to leave you with a quote from Rabbi Tarfon, a fifth century Jewish leader, so that you have something to hold on to when the discussion about “What is White?” dies down, and the question, “So what are you going to do about it?” remains. Rather than being overwhelmed by the task ahead we should remember Rabbi Tarfon’s words:

It is not upon you to finish the task.  
Neither are you free to desist from it.

Please send comments, feedback, resources, and suggestions for distribution to [paul@paulkivel.com](mailto:paul@paulkivel.com). Further resources are available at [www.paulkivel.com](http://www.paulkivel.com).