

Counting on Whiteness: Religion, race, ethnicity, and the politics of Jewish demography

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American Jews have long been an anomaly for scholars concerned with understanding how they fit into extant social scientific or historical categories. Sometimes they seem best described as an ethnic group, other times as a religious one. This ambiguity has also vexed Jewish communal leaders whose desire to comprehend their communities has largely been underwritten by their intention to protect it. This intersection of sociological methods and schema and Jewish communal concerns has resulted in decisive omissions regarding how best to account for the racial and ethnic diversity of American Jews. An analysis of survey instruments used in 175 American Jewish population studies and community portraits conducted since 1970 reveals a focus on questions of religious practice and an avoidance of those about race and ethnicity, resulting in a “religio-racial formation” of American Jews as White. This approach to studying American Jewish life has marginalized or excluded non-White Jews while ensuring ongoing Jewish communal access to Whiteness without having to claim it explicitly.

Keywords: *demography, Jews, race, social science, Whiteness.*

INTRODUCTION

The question of how Jews fit into U.S. racial, ethnic, and religious schema is complex. Perennial debates about how to categorize Jews sociologically—determining what Jews *are*—offer a range of descriptors, from nation (Herberg 1955), polity (Elazar 1976), and religion (Neusner 2002) to ethnicity (Glazer and Moynihan 1970) and race (Gilman 1991). Where those fail, scholars have turned to hybrid formulations like ethnonational (Yadgar 2011) and ethnoreligious (Liebman 1973), or to portmanteaus like peoplehood (Kaplan [1934] 2010; Pianko 2015). To arrive at a definitive classification would, ostensibly, settle the debate around where Jews fit into modern, often national, schema for organizing and grouping human populations (Bowker and Star 2000; Zerubavel 1991). Nevertheless, the typological ambiguity persists, lurking in nearly every subsequent question about Jews as a group: “Is there more to being Jewish than bagels and lox?”

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“What is the connection between Jews and Israel?” “Are Jews White?” At the core of these questions is an uncertainty about how to understand the distinctiveness of Jews in the United States as readily available terminology seems unable to capture the complexities of Jewish life (Alba 2006; Gonzales-Lesser 2020).

This article seeks to understand how American Jewish communal organizations—a constellation of philanthropically underwritten and largely charitable institutions (Bernstein 1983; Burstein 2011; Berman 2020)—have sought to answer this question demographically, through the production of community-level portraits of local Jewish populations (Krael-Tovi 2020; Rabin 2017). The data generated by these portraits are influential in helping Jewish communal organizations plan for and distribute their philanthropic resources. But rather than looking at the portraits themselves, this article examines the questions that constitute the survey instruments in order to gain greater insight into how community portraits have been generated. What can we learn about the preoccupations of American Jewish communal organizations by investigating the questions that they include and exclude? What does the inclusion of some questions and the exclusion of others reveal about the presumptions, prejudices, and desires of the organizations that support Jewish population research and Jewish communal life more generally?

This article answers these questions as they pertain to the religious, racial, and ethnic identities of American Jews. While there is great consistency with respect to the ways in which Jewish population studies inquire about practices that bear on Judaism as a religion, this is decidedly not the case with regard to asking about Jews’ racial and ethnic identities. Although many studies inquired about related issues such as national origin or immigration status, the majority of studies we examined did not include a single question about race or ethnicity. Those that do ask, do so in such an inconsistent manner as to render the data effectively useless, especially for the purposes of comparison over time and across communities. This uneven approach has resulted in a profound erasure of the racial and ethnic diversity of American Jews, which has promulgated a dominant narrative of American Jewish Whiteness.

We understand the lack of inquiry by American Jewish communal organizations to be part of an unarticulated “racial project” (Omi and Winant 1994). Drawing on Omi and Winant’s theory of racial formation, our analysis focuses attention on the role of Jewish population studies in the “process[es] by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed” (p. 55). Jewish communal organizations produce community portraits of Jews as an American religious community without accounting for the racial and ethnic identities of their members. By leaving questions of race and ethnicity unasked and unanswered, these studies facilitate continued benefits from a “possessive investment in whiteness” (Lipsitz 1998), simultaneously ensuring there is little systematic data available to challenge the “controlling image” (Collins 2004) of American Jews as White.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND BACKGROUND

The study of Jews and Judaism in the United States necessitates accounting for the centuries-long framing of these subjects within Christian-dominant European nation-states; it is nearly impossible to study Jews and Judaism today without accounting for how they have figured in Christian thought, including an examination of the roles that religion, race, and ethnicity have played in its historical development. As Boyarin (2018) and others have argued, the social formations that eventually came to be known as Judaism and Christianity emerged from the same population living in the Ancient Near East; the differences between them emerged as much from social distinctions as theological ones (Buell 2005). As Mason (2007) and Baker (2017) have argued, the language used to describe these differences were themselves the product of Christianity’s preoccupation with distinguishing itself from Judaism and Jews on both religious and ethnic terms.

“The very terms ‘ethnic’ (from the Greek *ethnos*) and ‘religion’ (from the Latin *religio*) are themselves products of a long history of Christian discourses specifically related to Jew(s)” (Baker:33). The desire to distinguish Jews and Judaism from Christians and Christianity led to the lethal emergence of a politics of blood purity during the medieval period in Europe. This obsession culminated in the Inquisition, when the Catholic Church killed Jews who refused to convert, and interrogated and executed Spanish and Portuguese Jews who *had* converted based on an understanding of the connection between one’s belief and one’s bloodlines (Gerber 1992; Nirenberg 2014:239–45).

The logic that fused ethnicity and religion did not abate with the rise of modernity and the proliferation of nation-states. Instead, the production of difference was regenerated in the emergent field of “race science” (Zimmermann 1986; Mosse and Browning 2020). German Wilhelm Marr coined the term “anti-Semitism” in an effort to translate older, theologically based rationales for the hatred of Jews into a more modern idiom. But he need not have worried about the theological basis of anti-Jewish prejudice becoming outmoded. As Carter has argued, Christian preoccupations with Jews and Judaism continued to underscore “modernity’s racial imagination,” grounded in Christianity’s desire to “sever itself from its Jewish roots” (2008:4). Keel expands this insight, arguing that modern “racial science” itself can be credited to “inherited racial reasoning practices and habits of mind derived from Christian intellectual history” in which Jews have continued to play a central, figurative role (2020:139).

Although the combination of religion, “racial science,” and politics helped perpetuate anti-semitism, it also created an opening for European Jewish intellectuals to offer their own explanation of Jews and Jewishness. This attempt to wrest the narrative from their non-Jewish colleagues resulted in the emergence of two dominant explanations for Jewish life. First, they reframed Jewishness in primarily religious terms, which distanced it from racial and ethnic designations and away from political notions of personhood. Second, they offered a potential way to maintain a group identity independent of a state structure.

Both of these explanations emerged, as Batnitzky observes, in response to the rise of modern nation-states, representing efforts to explain Jewish communal distinctiveness without threatening access to social, political, and economic emancipation that 19th-century European nationalism seemed to promise (2013:6). The construct of religion offered a way for Jews to explain their status as an “other within” to their Christian neighbors without calling attention to a kind of variation that might be understood as threatening or imply inferiority (Biale, Galchinsky, and Heschel 1998). Batnitzky argues that European Jewish intellectuals found a useful framework in the descriptive and analytic language of religion, allowing them to represent themselves per their wont rather than have a perspective imposed upon them. The “invention of Judaism” as a religion, says Batnitzky, helped Jews make themselves legible to non-Jews by amplifying certain forms of difference and muting or deflecting others within the growing order of nation-states.

Part of the power of nascent European nation-states rested in their ability to define their populations, which gave them the legal means to bestow rights and privileges upon some while simultaneously ignoring or excluding others. Foucault calls this systematic ordering of human life “biopolitics” ([1976] 1990), a key technology of nationalism, which Hacking (1982) extends to refer to the power to count populations. Modern nation-states mobilized an “avalanche of printed numbers,” fomenting a “fetishism for counting, which brings with it the need for easily applied categories in terms of which to count” (p. 294). While Hacking was concerned with how states asked about labor, deviance, and health, emerging out of this process was the power to categorize people, including their identities, beliefs, and behaviors, such as within the framework of “religion.” In line with Batnitzky’s argument, Smith observes, “The question of the ‘religions,’ [also] arose in response to an explosion of data” (1988:275).

Concerns about the status of Jews and Jewishness did not ease in the North American context. The first community of Jews to settle permanently in North America arrived from Recife, Brazil in 1654. Connected to the Amsterdam Jewish community, they identified as Sephardi, those Jews

tracing their roots back to the medieval Iberian Peninsula. As German Jews began arriving in the 19th century, they brought with them a different consciousness, one rooted in the racialized logic of European antisemitism. To mitigate their self-conscious precariousness, 19th-century American Jews cycled through a few different self-identified labels, including “Hebrews,” “Israelites,” and Americans of the “Mosaic Persuasion.” Each new term intended to explain themselves as legible and acceptable to the non-Jewish majority without attracting too much unwanted attention. But no amount of explaining or communal rebranding could stop Jews (among others) from figuring prominently in reactionary American political movements. The rise of American nativism that culminated in the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act served as a stark reminder of the power of racialized pseudoscience to steer American immigration policy, indicating to American Jews that their future in the United States might need additional explanatory efforts more suitable to 20th-century popular sensibilities (Higham 2002; Stern 2016; Okrent 2019).

American Jewish leaders found their response in what Berman (2009) has called “sociological Judaism.” Refined in the decades following World War II and characterized by the work of Glazer (1957), Handlin (1953), and Sklare (1958), this approach presented Jewishness as an ethnic pattern that fit snugly within existing patterns of American liberalism. Using the tools of modern social science to confirm what Sarna (1998) calls the “cult of synthesis”—which emphasized the congruence of American and Jewish values, and thus, of non-Jews and Jews in the United States—American Jewish sociologists made the argument that they should be studied as a unique American minority, one that was safely and assuredly American in commitment and orientation.

Sociological Judaism also offered new formulas through which American Jews could understand themselves (Berman 2009). Sociologists of American Jews hoped that surveys like the 1970 National Jewish Population Study (NJPS) would perform the kind of conceptual work that Igo has attributed to public opinion polls, which enabled “the public [to] now find out who ‘the public’ was” (2007:12). The ability to conduct surveys and polls generated its own kind of representational power, which was not lost on sociologists of American Jews. As if to operationalize Igo’s insight, the 1970 NJPS, which ushered in a new era of American Jewish population studies, subtitled each of the reports on the survey findings “facts for planning.”

Part of the rationale for conducting the 1970 national population study was the absence of consistent national data about American Jews, more specifically the lack of a question on the decennial U.S. Census that would have allowed Jews to identify themselves as Jews religiously. As Goldstein lamented, “The 1970 census, for example, collected data on such widely different factors as education, income, occupation, migration, disability, fertility, housing, and the number of washing machines and television sets. Yet, the U.S. Census omitted any question on religion” (1972:4). Ironically, the omission of religion from the U.S. Census can be traced to the same set of mid-20th-century concerns that animated sociological Judaism in the first place. As discussions arose around whether or not to include a religion question on the federal census, American Jewish leaders spoke out strongly against it, primarily out of fear that revealing the small size of the American Jewish community would provoke antisemitic charges of Jews’ overrepresentation in the halls of politics and business (Schultz 2006).

The debate about religion questions on the U.S. Census reveals two central and interlocking concerns for sociological Judaism. First, it indicated the power of data, in terms of both its presence and absence. Fighting to keep a religion question off of the census meant choosing willful ignorance about American Jews in the name of preserving acquired privileges, social mobility, and/or what they thought would be best for their community. The limit of what they wished to know or discover about themselves was to be defined by the point at which sociological Judaism could potentially betray the broader communal concerns in whose service it was formulated. As such, sociological Judaism leveraged its power by asking certain questions and ignoring others. Believing that omitting religion from the census would benefit them, proponents of sociological

Judaism enacted the power of when and how to ask particular questions while refraining from posing others.

Second, it advanced a definition of American Jews as a religious community. The U.S. Census collected data about American Jews (and continues to do so), as it does for all Americans. But by keeping a religion question off the page, American Jewish leaders leveraged the reigning understanding that American Jews constituted a religious community, an argument first made popular by Herberg (1955). In his renowned book *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, Herberg established the “tri-faith America” paradigm that dominated much of the Cold War period (Herzog 2011; Hollinger 2013; Schultz 2013), purporting that “integration into American life” happened as an immigrant group’s ethnicity transformed into religious difference, a pathway open largely to immigrant groups coded, if only implicitly, as White. In advancing this claim, he omitted designations of race and racialization “except for Negroes and those of Oriental origin” (Herberg: 36, 42).

Herberg’s influence loomed large in sociological Judaism, and American Jewish leaders doubled down on religion and values as the primary registers for expressing the “cult of synthesis,” which gained greater purchase in the celebrations of 1954 that marked 300 years of Jewish life in North America (Rosen 2004). Now established as one of America’s three primary religious communities, American Jews celebrated and promoted a vision of themselves that dovetailed perfectly with the midcentury American values of equality and freedom. The hope was that doing so would deflect antisemitism or other concerns about how one might otherwise understand American Jewish distinctiveness (Berman 2009). Following Herberg’s thesis, the category of religion acted as the terminus for the trajectory from ethnic immigrant to full-fledged American. Given how this framing benefitted the American Jewish community, why complicate things by asking about Jews’ racial or ethnic identities?

The result of the emphasis on religion born of these developments fostered a “controlling image” of American Jews as a White religious community. Often, this representation of Jews was reinforced through the discourse of “Black-Jewish relations,” which, unwittingly or not, reinforced associations between Whiteness and Jewishness by implicitly pitting the two communities as distinct. Few individuals, it was assumed, could claim both identity labels (Berman 1994; Diner 1995; Goldschmidt 2006; Dollinger 2018).

Even critical studies of American Jewish relationships to Whiteness have reinforced this association. For instance, Brodtkin’s *How Jews Became White Folks* (1998) traces how postwar fiscal policies like Federal Housing Authority loans and the G.I. Bill helped Jews vault into the predominantly White middle class. But the implicit question in the book’s title betrays a racialized answer in which Jews *became* White folks, leaving out those Jews who did not and could not take this path. Similarly, Jacobson (1999, 2008) examines Jews’ experiences as a “white ethnic” community and Goldstein (2008) examines how 19th- and early 20th-century American Jews negotiated their relationship to American racial categories, both ducking in and out of Whiteness while never giving a straight answer as to Jews’ racial or ethnic identities. Where non-White Jews appear in scholarship, they often do so as curiosities (Chireau and Deutsch 2000; Melnick 2001), or as a case of communities that engage with Judaism but largely fall outside of the norms and structures of American Jewish communal life (Dorman 2016; Jackson 2013).

So hegemonic has the portrait of sociological Jewry’s Whiteness become that even sociologist Haynes (2018), whose work documents the lives of Jews of African descent, summarized the scholarly consensus in this way: “Both East/West and black/white binaries shaped the racial morphing of Ashkenazi Jews [who trace their ancestors back to Europe and Russia] throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries until their newly imagined whiteness became inextricable from their Jewishness. Today, scholars agree that Jews have become white folks” (25).

This consensus is as much a product of scholarly discovery as it is the result of sociological Judaism’s avoidance of race and ethnicity. This approach has been central to the production of American Whiteness as the “racial formation” that need not signify (Omi and Winant 1994).

Table 1: U.S. Jewish population studies, by period

Year	1970–1977	1978–1997	1998–2020	1970–2020
Studies analyzed	8	80	87	175
Total without available survey instruments	0	11	6	17
Total number of Jewish population studies	8	91	93	192

By focusing so intently on the religious dimensions of American Jewish life, 20th-century Jewish communal organizations advanced a portrait of American Jews well suited for the “myth of synthesis” and “tri-faith America,” where race and ethnicity have barely registered. By largely avoiding race and ethnicity or, at best, by treating it in a cursory manner, the authors, sponsors, and researchers of American Jewish population studies willingly reinforced assumptions about American Jewish Whiteness by *not* documenting it and avoiding questions of race and ethnicity entirely, which created an accounting on Whiteness that works in silence.¹

The result was the construction of Jews as a “religio-racial” community, a term that Judith Weisenfeld coined to “capture the commitment of members of these groups to understanding individual and collective identity as constituted in the conjunction of religion and race” (Weisenfeld 2020:5). But unlike the people and communities that feature in Weisenfeld’s work, the religio-racial formation of American Jews has been constituted by avoiding substantive engagements with the racialized and ethnic identities of its members. Jewish population studies, as a powerful and popular method of documenting American Jewry in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, reinforced this perception largely by avoiding questions about racialized or ethnic identities of American Jews. The ability to avoid talking about race or ethnicity, of course, is an element in the production of White privilege, but it is a volitional act. As we demonstrate below, the silence of American Jewish organizations regarding the racial and ethnic identities of American Jews has played a powerful role in allowing many Jews to capitalize on the benefits of Whiteness without having to engage in the delicate politics of talking about racial and ethnic diversity as it exists within American Jewry.

1. DATA AND METHODS

The starting point for our analysis is the 192 Jewish community studies conducted between 1970 and 2020. Because we are primarily concerned with the presence of questions and their wording, we limited our data set to studies with questionnaires we could access, leaving a total of 175 studies (see Table 1 for an overview). Each of these demographic studies was conducted by researchers working in partnership with a local Jewish “federation,” an independent agency that has historically served as a coordinator of communal and charitable efforts in and beyond the Jewish community (Berman 2020).

Boston established the first federation in 1895; over the next century, nearly every city with a substantive Jewish population followed suit. In 1935, the network of local federations federated themselves, creating a national “federation system,” currently known as the Jewish Federations of

¹This all said, over the past two decades a growing number of memoirs (Walker 2002; Pryor 2007; Gad 2019; Had-dish 2019) and an expanding body of scholarship (Tobin, Tobin, and Rubin 2005; Kaye/Kantrowitz 2007; Hordes 2008; Soomekh 2012, 2015; Parfitt 2013; Kim and Leavitt 2016; Hahn Tapper 2016; Limonic 2019) have tried to balance the scales by offering careful accounts of the experiences of non-White Jews.

North America (JFNA).² For much of the 20th century, Jewish federations were among the most powerful institutions in American Jewish life, wielding millions of dollars in philanthropic influence; JFNA referred to itself as the “central address” for American Jews (Linzer and Schnall et al. 1998:67). While local federations sponsor population studies of their own local communities, the predecessors of JFNA oversaw and underwrote the 1970, 1990, and 2000 NJPS.

Jewish population studies, both national and local, are typically undertaken to inform community and organizational planning (Kotler-Berkowitz 2016; Sheskin 2001). Usually, Jewish federations work closely with researchers who are hired through an open-bidding process to construct study materials. The design of everything from sampling frames and the phrasing of survey questions to the administration and analysis thereof is shaped by the give-and-take nature of the relationships between researchers and those who are both the funders of and the audience for the research. Which questions are included or omitted is the result of calculations that aim to balance what the federations want to know against what the researchers suggest would be most useful to them, always with consideration for the length of the survey.³ While the studies are intended to produce usable data for planning charitable giving, the survey instruments themselves are a valuable source of independent data reflective of characteristics of the local Jewish communities that Jewish communal organizations wish to know more about. The absence of certain questions evidence areas of inquiry that Jewish leaders felt unimportant or in which they were uninterested.

Consistent with the public-facing nature of the research, materials from most of the studies are freely and publicly available at the Berman Jewish DataBank (www.jewishdatabank.org). The DataBank, which is maintained by JFNA, archives a range of research materials on Jewish life in the United States and around the world. For our analysis, we focused on population studies that collected original survey data in an effort to document the size and characteristics of Jewish communities in the United States. For context, we also discuss the approaches used in the three National Jewish Population Surveys (NJPS 1970, 1990, and 2000), as well as the Pew Research Center’s two national studies of American Jews (2013, 2021). The corpus of our analysis included survey instruments, methodological appendices, published reports and assessments, and commentary that appeared in the Jewish-affiliated press.

Our decision to focus on local population studies conducted since 1970 was informed by three considerations. First, the number of local population studies expanded dramatically during this 50-year period as more and more communities began sponsoring their own studies. According to Goldstein (1972), 20 community studies were conducted between 1950 and 1969, whereas 67 studies were undertaken over the next two decades (1970–1989) and another 86 during the two decades thereafter (1990–2009). Second, local studies tend to be more deeply informed by the needs, insights, and knowledge of specific Jewish communities and thus we expected them to be more sensitive to the composition of particular Jewish communities.

Third, our study begins with surveys conducted in 1970 because the larger, national interest in civil rights and antidiscrimination enforcement of the era led to the authoring of the first federal guidelines on measuring race or ethnicity in 1977, later revised in 1997 (OMB 1997). Examining the practices these researchers used before the publication of the federal guidelines, in the decades in between, and then again after the revision, allows us to account for whether demographers of American Jewry used or incorporated nationally standardized measures. Many surveys

²To give some perspective on the power of JFNA and its members, according to their 2018 Annual Report, JFNA had more than \$348 million in assets and liabilities, which did not account for the financial holdings of the 146 local federations that comprise the members of the organization, whose combined assets easily topped \$1 billion. In their 2018 Annual Report, UJA-Federation of New York announced that it had raised \$249.3 million during their annual campaign, making it the largest and most financially powerful federation in the United States (UJA-Federation of New York 2018).

³Two authors of this article have consulted on population studies both local and national in scope, including the 2020 Pew Report on American Jews.

use population proportions from the decennial U.S. Census—for characteristics such as race, gender, and age—to weight their observations in order to provide statistics that can be described as “representative” of the broader population. Thus, adhering to federal guidelines when asking about race and ethnicity would have not only facilitated survey weighting but also would have enabled consistent comparisons within and between the various local American Jewish population studies.⁴

In order to understand how Jewish population studies produced portraits of American Jewry, we followed a three-step process. First, we identified instances of racial or ethnic representation in the survey instruments and cross-referenced the text of specific questions with relevant passages in accompanying narrative and technical reports. Second, we analyzed the questions that asked about race or ethnicity, looking at whether or not they adhered to federal guidelines for racial and ethnic data collection or if they were sensitive to contemporary norms in their naming and answer options. Third, we considered how surveys treated other aspects of American Jewish diversity, such as distinctions regarding intracommunal religious affiliations, in order to compare the relative importance given to race, ethnicity, and religion in the construction of American Jewry.

4. FINDINGS

Our findings are organized in four stages. First, we present data on questions regarding race and ethnicity in Jewish population studies from 1970 until the adoption of the revised Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidelines for race and ethnicity in 1997. Then, we focus on survey instruments for the period of 1998–2020. Third, we put local population studies in conversation with some of the national Jewish population studies. We conclude with a comparison between the treatment of race or ethnicity and the treatment of religious behaviors among American Jews.

(Not) Accounting for Race and Ethnicity

During the 50 years between 1970 and 2020, American Jewish communities undertook no fewer than 192 community-level population studies. Between 1970 and 1977, when the first federal guidelines were published, American Jewish communities commissioned eight community studies. Only one included a question about the racial or ethnic identities of respondents. Phrased in terms of the respondent’s “background,” the response options—“American Indian, Black, Oriental, Spanish, White or something else? (What?)”—clearly prompted respondents to answer in racial terms (Boston 1975). It did not ask about whether the respondent was Sephardi, for example, nor did it inquire about the national origins of respondents or their ancestors.

Between the publication of the first federal guidelines (1977) and the revised guidelines (1997), American Jewish communities undertook 91 population studies, 80 of which had accessible survey instruments. Eight of the 80 included questions that explicitly inquired about race or ethnicity. Two included questions that asked or provided response options that corresponded to American racial categories, though the question did not reference race: Los Angeles (1997) asked about respondents’ “ethnicity” and New York (1991) prompted respondents to report what

⁴In some of the studies that did not include questions about race or ethnicity, the researchers nevertheless deployed weighting schemes to approximate the population size of non-White or non-Ashkenazi Jews. This raises questions about the validity of such published estimates, which are beyond the scope of this article. For our purposes, what is of most interest is that although race and ethnicity are often key components in survey weighting schemes, the researchers and federations responsible for these study designs have not found questions about race or ethnicity to be sufficiently valuable to consistently warrant their inclusion.

they “consider” themselves to be. Two others asked respondents if they identified as “Hispanic” and/or “Sephardic,” but nothing else. An additional four included an option for respondents to identify as “Sephardi,” one of which included “Sephardi” in a response list of Jewish religious affiliation (alongside Reform, Orthodox, etc.). Of these eight studies, just three included an option for respondents to identify as “Ashkenazi,” the blanket term for Jews from Eastern Europe.

Together, the 80 Jewish population studies conducted between 1978 and 1997 leave a great many gaps in knowledge about the racial and ethnic identities of American Jews. Looking for alternative sources of insight, like national origin or immigration status, does not yield reliable data. The vast majority of population studies until 1997 did not include questions about these concerns. When they did, question wording and response options indicate that these questions were intended to solicit information specifically about immigration status and national origin, not as a proxy for racial or ethnic identity. This is made clear in question wording like “What was the last country you resided in before coming to the U.S.?” (Los Angeles 1997) or “in what state or foreign country were you born?” (Miami 1994). Survey writers had access to and knowledge of federal standards for racial and ethnic data collection in the United States and they did not use it.

Between 1998 and 2020, American Jewish communities undertook an additional 93 local population studies, of which we had access to survey instruments for 87. Of these 87 studies, 44 (51 percent) did not include a single opportunity for respondents to register a racial or ethnic identity, including White or Ashkenazi. Although this period saw an increase in the prevalence of questions about race and ethnicity, it is striking that even after the revision of the OMB guidelines for collecting racial and ethnic data, the majority of American Jewish population studies avoided asking about the racial or ethnic identities of their respondents. Indeed, five of the post-1997 studies did not include any direct questions about the racialized identities of respondents and instead presented population estimates derived from the U.S. Census and other demographic sources.

The 43 remaining studies (49 percent) that included at least one opportunity for respondents to register their racial or ethnic identities did so rather unsystematically (see Table 2 for an overview). Some of these surveys included questions on race or ethnicity with response options that aligned generally with OMB standards by including choices such as White, Black, or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian, or other Pacific Islander. However, just two studies followed the U.S. Census two-question approach, in which asking about Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origins precedes the question about race (Parker et al. 2015).⁵ Nineteen studies instead employed a single-question approach, providing respondents with a variety of racial categories including Hispanic and White, though many employed the nonstandard term “Caucasian.” Only one study allowed respondents to choose more than one response to this type of question, though many offered stand-alone multiracial or “biracial” response options.

Asking about race or ethnicity with some approximation of U.S. standard categories, however, did not always mean that studies also included questions about Jewish ethnic identities. Seventeen of the 19 studies that included at least one question about race or ethnicity did not include a separate question asking whether they identified as Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi (Jews of Middle Eastern descent), or some other ethnic identity particular to Jews.

Some studies took the opposite approach, asking only about select ethnic identities and not about racial identities. For example, three studies posed only a single question that asked if respondents identified as Sephardi, while eight limited their inquiry to two questions, one that asked if respondents were Hispanic and another that asked if they identified as Sephardi. By focusing on just one or two specific identities, these 11 studies were missing data about any respondent or member of their household that might not have identified as either Sephardi or Hispanic. This

⁵The Census Bureau recently tested a single “combined” question that includes “Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin” as an answer option (Mathews et al. 2017). However, this format has yet to receive approval from OMB.

Table 2: Race and ethnicity questions in Jewish population studies

	1970-1977			1978-1997			1998-2020			1970-2020		
	Total	% of Total studies analyzed (N = 8)	% of Those that included a question (N = 1)	Total	% of Total studies analyzed (N = 80)	% of Those that included a question (N = 8)	Total	% of Total studies analyzed (N = 87)	% of Those that included a question (N = 43)	Total	% of Total studies analyzed (N = 175)	% of Those that included a question (N = 52)
Did not include at least one question about race or ethnicity	7	87.5%	x	72	90.0%	x	44	50.6%	x	123	70.00%	X
Included at least one question about race or ethnicity	1	12.5%	x	8	10.0%	x	43	49.4%	x	52	30%	X
Employed a U.S. Census-style two-question format	0	0.0%	x	1	1.3%	13%	2	2.3%	5%	3	1.70%	5.70%
Used only OMB category names	0	0.0%	x	0	0.0%	x	0	0.0%	x	0	0.00%	0%
Used nonstandard formulation for race or ethnicity	1	12.5%	100%	8	10.0%	100%	19	21.8%	44%	28	16.00%	54%
Allowed multiple responses to question of race and ethnicity	0	0.0%	x	0	0.0%	x	1	1.1%	2.30%	1	0.60%	2%
Includes stand-alone question about "Jewish ethnicity" that allows respondents to indicate Ashkenazi, Sephardi, or Mizrahi	1	12.5%	100%	3	3.8%	27%	6	6.9%	14%	10	5.70%	19.00%
Includes at least one stand-alone question that only asks about Sephardi identity	0	0.0%	x	2	2.5%	25%	8	9.2%	18.60%	10	5.70%	19%
Includes Sephardi / Ashkenazi / Mizrahi as a response option to any other question	0	0.0%	x	1	1.3%	13%	6	6.9%	14%	7	4.00%	13.40%
Includes instructions to terminate interview if respondent denotes they are a Converso, Crypto-Jew, or Black Hebrew	0	0.0%	x	0	0.0%	x	18	20.7%	49%	18	10%	34.60%

Note: Subcategories are not exclusive.

allowed Whiteness and Ashkenaziness to implicitly fill in for the missing data. The result has been population studies that present only a partial portrait of American Jewry, underwritten by assumptions about Jewish identity that are quite literally left unmarked.

These issues are exacerbated when we shift attention from individuals to households. Of the 43 studies that included at least one question about racial or ethnic identities, 24 restricted themselves to the respondent's racial or ethnic identity and did not ask about other members of the respondents' household. Some surveys, like New York (2011), asked only if the racial identity of other household members was the same as or different from the respondent without asking for specifics. This paucity of interest in the racial or ethnic identities of household members is particularly notable for a community deeply concerned with the intergenerational transmission of Jewish identity in the context of other forms of exogamy, such as religious intermarriage. Indeed, as we will see below, religious endogamy has been a persistent concern for demographers of American Jewry.

Variations in Question Wording

Questions and response options among these 43 studies sometimes combined and conflated categories such as ethnicity, nation, parentage, and race, particularly when asking about identities particular to Jews. Portland (2009) asked "What is your ancestral heritage?" and provided four responses: Ashkenazi, Sephardi/Mizrachi, other, don't know. Others took a different tack, asking respondents to report on "the Jewish ethnicity of your household" (Pittsburgh, 2017), or through questions like "Regarding your Jewish ethnicity, do you consider yourself to be Ashkenazi (AHSHH-K'NAHZEE), Sephardi (SS-FAR-DEE) or something else?" (Houston, 2001).

Still other studies paired nonstandard question wording or response options with non-mutually exclusive or non-exhaustive lists of responses. Four studies used the term "person of color," as in Cincinnati's 2019 formulation, "Do you identify as a person of color or being of Hispanic or Latino origin?" (see also Pittsburgh 2017, Washington DC 2017, and Baltimore 2019). Although this may seem to be in sync with contemporary vernacular and political discourse, the question of who counts as a "person of color" is highly contested (Yuen 1997; Luquis 2010) and has not been officially sanctioned for statistical data collection or survey-based research; it is not part of current OMB guidelines. Almost certainly, variations in terminology introduce uncertainty in the surveys' ability to accurately account for racial and ethnic identity (see Table 3 for example of question wording).

It was, however, clear that these questions were meant to elicit answers that could map onto American racial and ethnic categories, even though American Jews might conflate their national or ancestral origins with a kind of Jewish ethnicity. When surveys included questions about national origins or immigration, they explicitly employed such terms to avoid confusion. Typically, as in the case of Philadelphia (2009), question wording specifically asked respondents to identify their country of birth or the location of their immediate past residence. "Where did you live before you moved to the Philadelphia area? I just need the state or, if another country, the name of that country." Seattle (2000) asked respondents to name their "Jewish ethnicity," and in a separate question, to identify their "ethnicity." The response options for the former included Sephardi and Ashkenazi among others (including Iranian, Iraqi, Mixed, Reform, Hasidic/Lubavitch/Chabad, Can't Describe, etc.). Response options for the latter clearly corresponded to American racial and ethnic categories (including Black, Hispanic, Filipino, Chinese, Mexican, Puerto Rican, etc.).

While American Jews might consider their nationality or country of origin as evidence of their Jewish ethnicity (Iraqi Jews, Moroccan Jews, Persian Jews, and so on), American Jewish demographers and sociologists constructed their questions so as to reduce confusion between questions about respondents' "Jewish ethnicity" and those that asked about the national or regional origins of their families. We can offer no insight into the minds of survey respondents, but insofar as this article focuses on the language and structure of survey instruments, we find that

Table 3: Comparison of OMB race and ethnicity categories and typical one-question approach of local Jewish population studies

U.S Office of Management and Budget Standards for Race and Ethnicity (1997)	2010 Metropolitan Chicago Jewish Community Survey
Ethnicity Categories	Question:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hispanic or Latino • Not Hispanic or Latino 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regarding your ethnicity, do you consider yourself to be White, Hispanic, Black or African American, Asian or Pacific Islander, bi- or multi-racial, or something else?
Race Categories	Response Options:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • American Indian or Alaska Native • Asian • Black or African American • Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander • White 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White (non-Hispanic/Latino) (Caucasian) • Hispanic • Black – African American (non-Hispanic/Latino) • Asian/Pacific Islander • Bi- or multi-racial • Other (Specify)

they contribute to the construction of an American Jewry that is largely unmarked by race and thus able to access some of the privileges of American Whiteness without actually claiming it.

Although our analysis documents a dearth of data on race or ethnicity among Jewish population studies, this is not true of all local efforts. UJA-Federation of New York, which sponsored the city's 2011 study, released a separate report exploring racial and ethnic identities of respondents and their households in detail. The San Francisco Bay Area study (2017) asked respondents about the racial or ethnic identities of everyone in their households, as did the study of Greater Denver (2019), which went further by asking about the experiences of self-identified "Jews of Color" in synagogues, Jewish community centers, and other Jewish organizations. These examples are laudable, but they also were clear outliers.

The National Context

The scattershot approach to identifying racial and ethnic identities of American Jews is reflected on the national level, as well. The 1970 NJPS did not ask respondents about their racial or ethnic identities but instead instructed interviewers to record the “ethnic group of household” (options: “white, Indian, negro, latin-Puerto Rican, oriental, don’t know”) based on their impressions. The interviewer observations were not presented in any study report that we could find, and the terms “Ashkenazi,” “Mizrahi,” and “Sephardi” did not appear in either the questionnaire or the resultant reports. Two decades later, the “Highlights” document of the 1990 NJPS reported that “3.5 percent of all qualified respondents stated they were Black, and 3.0 percent stated they were of Hispanic origin” (Kosmin et al. 1991:10). How researchers arrived at these conclusions, however, is unclear, as the survey instrument included only one question about ethnicity—“Regarding your Jewish ethnicity, do you consider yourself to be Sephardi, Ashkenazi or something else?”—and we could not locate a question about race in the survey instrument, the methodological report, or other reported frequencies.⁶ The “Highlights” document also did not report the percentage of American Jews who identified as White, though it offered the “U.S. White Population” as a comparison to respondents’ frequencies in several tables.

Conducted after the OMB’s 1997 revised guidelines, the 2000 NJPS was the first national survey of American Jews to employ a two-question U.S. Census-style measurement approach. Yet the wording and question order did not follow federal guidelines and avoided the terms “race” and “ethnicity” entirely. The first question simply prompted respondents by asking, “Are you...” and instructed administrators to provide a list of responses: “White, African-American (BLACK), Asian, Native American (AMERICAN INDIAN), some other race.” The second question asked “Are you Hispanic or Latino?,” reversing the recommended question order.⁷ This survey also asked respondents whether they “consider” themselves to be “An Ashkenazi Jew” or “A Sephardi Jew,” both, or neither. Data gathered from these questions, however, was not presented in any of the 13 published reports or 14 publicly available slide decks, including the one titled “Strength, Challenge, and Diversity in the American Jewish Population.” Indeed, the authors of the 2000 NJPS reports and analyses appear to have avoided any mention of race altogether, even for reasons of comparison. (Although the “Strength, Challenge, and Diversity” report uses the term “ethnicity” to refer to American Jews categorically, it is not in reference to Jews’ intra-communal ethnic diversity.)

Two decades later, the Pew Research Center’s report, “American Jews in 2020,” (2021) finally paid careful attention to both the racial and ethnic identities of respondents. The report offered the most robust accounting of Jews’ ethnic and racial identities and tried to represent the complexities of this situation through a series of detailed breakdowns of respondents’ racial and ethnic identities. Aware of the complex history that we have explored here, the authors of the study tried to offer a novel approach to engaging with questions of racial and ethnic identity by inviting readers to decide for themselves how they might assess their overall racial or ethnic diversity of the American Jewish community (2021:174–75).

⁶This survey had a screening interview or a household roster that was completed during an initial visit or phone call before the full survey was administered. This would be consistent with other national surveys such as the General Social Survey, which first collects a person’s report on all household members, including their age, sex, and race. From this information, an eligible respondent is then selected to be interviewed. If NJPS researchers followed a similar practice, there is no indication of it in the available documentation.

⁷Not using “race” in the question is similar to the approach of the 1980 census, which simply read: “Is this person....” Also, in the 1980 and 1990 censuses, a stand-alone Hispanic origin did follow the race question. The results of testing related to the 1997 revised guidelines that recommended putting Hispanic origin first in the hopes that people would stop skipping it entirely. The 2000 NJPS was therefore following federal data collection practices, but they were from 10 to 20 years earlier, rather than the newly revised standards.

Accounting for Religion

The shortcomings in accounting for the racial and ethnic identities of American Jews in Jewish population studies become more apparent when contrasted with approaches toward dimensions of Jewish life, such as ritual practices, beliefs, and synagogue membership and attendance, data conventionally aligned with North American understandings of religion. The contrast between questions about race or ethnicity and those about religion suggest both that religion is the normative framework for understanding American Jews and evidence the persistence of interest in religion over ethnicity on the part of sociologists of American Jews.

The definition of American Jews as a religious community derives, in part, from Herberg's midcentury formulation of American Jews as a religious community. It has been elaborated further by demographer DellaPergola, who employs a "mutually exclusive identification framework" in his analyses. DellaPergola's approach excludes Jewish people who claim to follow Judaism and another religion (2017:302). The Pew Research Center follows DellaPergola, excluding people from their "core Jewish population" who claim more than one religious identity (Pew 2021:52). Both Pew studies of American Jews (2013, 2021) and the 1990 and 2000 NJPS include both "Jews by religion" and "Jews not by religion" in their population studies. But this approach still advances Judaism—and thus religion more generally—as the dominant framework through which the surveys understand American Jews. In order to be included in Jewish population studies, respondents are permitted one religion or fewer, but that religion can only be Judaism.

Saxe and Tighe, whose American Jewish Population Project is one of the most sophisticated efforts to estimate the characteristics and size of the American Jewish community, employ a similar test in which belonging to "any other religious group" disqualifies respondents from being included in Jewish population counts (Tighe et al. 2021:36). The authors gloss this approach with remarkable confidence, stating "that the core Jewish population should exclude those who currently belong to another religion is non-controversial" (Tighe et al. 2021:36). The taken-for-grantedness of this assertion derives from the decades-long momentum of sociological Judaism that sought to emphasize Jews as a religious group, a formulation constructed through the marginalization of ethnicity or race.

This bears out in the approaches of a small number of studies that apply a religious definition for participation to people whose claims to Judaism might be complicated. Eighteen of the 87 post-1997 population studies with available survey questionnaires (21 percent) included a screening question that allowed respondents to identify as a "Crypto Jew," "Marrano," or "Converso," thereby indicating a subset of those with Jewish heritage from Medieval Spain or Portugal. But these response options were only included as part of a procedure for terminating the interview (see, e.g., South Palm Beach 2005, Portland, ME 2007, or San Antonio 2007). If interviewers recorded such a response, they were instructed to end the interview, effectively removing these individuals from local Jewish population counts altogether. Several of these studies also excluded individuals who identified as "Black Hebrew," providing a clear, if often unrecorded and unspoken, definition of who should count among American Jews, even before they were actually counted.

Even in less ambiguous cases, the primacy of religion as the prevailing interest of Jewish population studies has been plainly obvious. Each of the 175 studies conducted since 1970 included multiple questions about and/or reported on ritual practices and other areas of Jewish communal participation that might readily be understood as religious, even by a relatively malleable definition; each study asked respondents for their identification relative to the major American Jewish religious movements (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform); and each included a host of questions about respondents' religious ritual behaviors, often regarding specific practices like lighting Shabbat candles, celebrating Hanukkah, participating in a Passover Seder, or fasting on the Jewish holiday Yom Kippur.

The attention paid to Jewish religious affiliation and ritual practices helps highlight the absence of questions about racial and ethnic identity. To take one such example, with respect to race and ethnicity Miami (2014) only asked respondents to indicate whether or not they were Sephardi and whether or not they were Hispanic, without offering or inquiring about other racial or ethnic identities. On other topics, the Miami study included no fewer than six questions about the respondent's Jewish education, no fewer than 10 regarding the Jewish education of their children, no fewer than 18 about charitable giving as it pertains to Jewish and non-Jewish causes, including the local federation, and three separate questions about the religious practice of keeping kosher. The Boston (2015) study was similar, with 13 questions about the Jewish education of children, 14 questions about religious practice, and four questions about the respondent's knowledge of or attitude toward the local Jewish federation. Even studies of smaller Jewish communities supported this pattern; Louisville (2006) included four separate questions about synagogue membership and at least three questions about Jewish religious practice and attitudes toward the local federation.

The preoccupation with religion as the major area of inquiry is also evidenced by questions about religious intermarriage, which have been included in nearly all the Jewish population studies dating back to 1970. Most notably, the 1990 NJPS reported relatively high rates of religious exogamy, a finding which, in some quarters of American Jewish life, raised concerns about the health and vitality of the American Jewish community (Goldstein 1972:78; Winter 2002; Phillips 2005; Cohen and Wertheimer 2006; McGinity, 2012, 2014; Sasson 2013; Thompson 2013; Sasson et al. 2017). While generally ignoring racial and ethnic intermarriage, this extensive attention to religious endogamy reinforces the narrative of its importance in terms of Jewish marriage markets, and further underscoring religion as the primary designation for understanding American Jews (Fishman 2004; Shain 2015).

DISCUSSION

By failing to include questions about the racial or ethnic identities of American Jews, or by inquiring about them inconsistently, Jewish communal organizations have employed the methods and logics of sociological Judaism to perpetuate a "controlling image" of American Jews as a White religious community. Local population studies have been a powerful tool in advancing this portrait, largely carried out by avoiding talking about race or ethnicity and focusing on questions of religious belief and practice. By failing to ask about the racial or ethnic identities of American Jews, despite the availability of federal guidelines for racial data collection and the significance of race and ethnicity in American life more generally, Jewish population studies work in concert with other racial projects in shaping the overall representation of Jews in America as White.

One result of this approach has been the marginalization, ignoring, or even silencing of African American, Asian American, Hispanic, Native American, Pacific Islander, Persian, Sephardi, Mizrahi, multiracial and other non-Ashkenazi Jews. In a community where population studies have the potential to guide millions of dollars in community resources, the exclusion or erasure of certain segments of the population has real material consequences. This approach has also created a self-fulfilling prophecy where claims about the perceived absence of, for example, African Americans, Asian Americans, Latino/a or multiracial Americans from Jewish communal life is used as evidence of and justification for their statistical and cultural marginality. The assignment of marginal status translates into a lack of attention to these segments of American Jewish communities and perpetuates their absence from day-to-day communal life.

By counting on Whiteness, Jewish population studies minimize internal Jewish racial and ethnic diversity in ways that also produce symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1984, 1991). Jewish Whiteness perpetuated by the failure to ask about the racial and ethnic identities of American Jews has resulted in countless personal slights and informal but persistent exclusions of people on the basis

of race or ethnicity. By avoiding questions about race or ethnicity, or by including them inconsistently, these population studies effectively silence substantive discussion about Jewish racial and ethnic diversity, generating a religio-racial portrait of American Jewry that works largely by implication, not investigation.

Another result of the erasure of race and ethnicity from American Jewish communal discourse is that it allows the majority of American Jews to share in the power and privilege of Whiteness while leaving it as an unmarked aspect of their identities. As Bonilla-Silva argues (2003), the hegemony of Whiteness in the U.S. thrives on such omissions without anyone having to acknowledge or explicitly affirm its premise or power. American Jewish population studies participate in this phenomenon by defining who counts as Jewish primarily in terms of a religious identity, and by focusing their questions on religious aspects of Jewish life including ritual practices, formal Jewish education, and religious, rather than racial or ethnic, exogamy.

This approach has long allowed American Jewish communal organizations to count on Whiteness without having to account for it, enabling it to also go uncounted and unarticulated. Not asking about racial or ethnic identities is, in and of itself, an approach to religio-racial formation that has long found success in frameworks and narratives produced by sociological Judaism. This construction of a deracinated Jewishness is at odds with other ways in which many American Jews, especially those holding positions of power in Jewish communal organizations, have long benefitted from access to the material benefits afforded to White-identified Americans (Brodkin 1998; Lipsitz 1998).

Many of the technical problems we have highlighted with regard to how race and ethnicity are conceptualized and measured reflect fundamental problems in survey design (Schaeffer and Presser 2003), such as tendencies toward asking questions without clear referents, offering non-mutually exclusive and exhaustive answer options, and failing to use consistent measurements, which would otherwise allow for comparison across surveys. In fact, recent research also highlights the importance of accounting for multiple dimensions of race in studies of identity and inequality, including not only self-identification according to U.S. Census categories but also known ancestry, skin color, and reflected race, or how one is likely to be perceived racially by others (Roth 2016; Saperstein, Kizer, and Penner 2016; Morning and Saperstein 2018). Devoting multiple questions to describing racial and ethnic diversity in local Jewish population studies could provide systematic data on whether or not variation along one dimension of race or ethnicity, such as geographic ancestry, aligns with variations on other dimensions, such as skin color or self-identification. We did not hold the studies in our examination to these current best practices outlined by scholars of race and ethnicity; if we had, they would have fared much worse.

There are recent signs of change, led by Jewish communities' increasing awareness of the salience of race and ethnicity in Jewish lives, and by sociologists turning their attention to the matter with greater interest and intention. The Pew Research Center's "American Jews in 2020" (2021) represents a significant step forward in attending to American Jews' racial and ethnic identities in its attempt to both differentiate between and account for interactions among country of origin, immigrant status, American racial categories, and Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and Mizrahi identities. Similarly, although not a population study and thus not comparable to population studies that claim representativeness, "Beyond the Count" (Belzer et al. 2021) offers the first systematic study of the experiences and perspectives of self-identified Jews of Color in the United States. Communities seeking to conduct local population studies are also increasingly coming to recognize the significance of including questions about racial and ethnic identities. Although sociological Judaism helped silence race and ethnicity in the latter half of the 20th century, social scientists are helping to lead the way toward more sophisticated considerations in the 21st century. These are positive signs that American Jewish communities are open to reckoning with questions not only of their own, internal racial and ethnic diversity, but with regard to larger questions about the place of American Jews within the broader landscape of a multiracial and multiethnic landscape.

CONCLUSION

During the early 20th century, amidst a burgeoning field of “racial science,” Jewish social scientists “were tempted simultaneously to embrace and reject the field: to embrace sciences’ methods, concepts, and the promise it held out for discovering knowledge, and to reject, in a variety of ways, the conclusions of science as they appeared to apply negatively to themselves” (Stepan, Gilman, and Harding 1993:178–79). The result was an approach to social science that sought to capitalize on the promise of scientific inquiry in ways that were informed by concerns for what those inquiries might reveal about Jews, and what they might mean to their social status within the dominant non-Jewish society. The legacies of this qualified embrace continue to inform 21st-century approaches to American Jewish population studies, specifically with regard to the ways that race and ethnicity figure in the production of Jews as a religio-racial community.

The present historical moment has raised the stakes on the politics of this silence. Public recognition of scholarship on racism and antiracism (Alexander 2010; Kendi 2019), the emergence of the Movement for Black Lives, and a push to assertively diversify the media and the upper echelons of “white-collar” professions have made clear that silence about race and diversity perpetuate racial hierarchies and White supremacy. By avoiding direct or consistent engagement with issues of race or ethnicity, American Jewish population studies, and the researchers and organizations who design and fund them, have contributed to this dynamic.

Racial and ethnic privilege is experienced by members of populations who do not have to address race or ethnicity as a feature of their daily lives. A century ago, immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe could not avoid the racial or ethnic questions pointed at them. They sought shelter from antisemitism in the unmarked racial status that Whiteness promised (Goldstein 2008). In the 21st century, the communal leadership of American Jewry has continued to cultivate approaches to self-representation that avoid racial designation. Yet in doing so, they have erased non-White and non-Ashkenazi Jews, many of whom cannot simply blend into the White-dominant American milieu. Collectively, the population studies under investigation dodge acknowledgment of internal racial and ethnic diversity while simultaneously promoting representations of an American Jewry that quietly reaps the privileges of Whiteness at the expense of African, Asian, Latino/a, and other Jewish communities who cannot or do not identify as White.

Assuming that the conventions of Jewish population studies were the result of unintentional biases, there is no time like the present to develop approaches that actively document the racial and ethnic diversity of the American Jewish population. This can be one part of a broader reckoning with the place of Jews in American racial projects, and in deepening understanding of how race and religion are often mutually constitutive. As agents of the Jewish community, federations and their philanthropic and research partnerships can commit to include a more robust set of questions in every future community portrait. More creative sampling techniques and more consistent inquiries into the diversity of identities within households will also help produce fuller and more vibrant portraits of American Jews. With better and more reliable data Jewish organizations will be better positioned to engage in more sophisticated analyses of the relationship between Jews, Whiteness, and all of the benefits conferred by associations with Whiteness.

The result of such an adjustment might be discomfiting for some. It can be challenging to grapple with the complications of racialized identities and the politics that attend such claims. It is also difficult to predict what the outcomes of directly addressing questions of race and ethnicity might be. But the relative comfort born of avoiding engagement with racial and ethnic diversity among Jews appears both thin and fleeting. For an American minority population with a robust communal infrastructure and a long history of self-study, both of which have been informed by concerns about maintaining in-group identity in the face of persistent exclusion and bias, American Jews are well-positioned to offer themselves as a case study that can help illuminate the complex politics and investments embedded in the interplay between race and religion in the United States.

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