

Social Perspectives

In both interviews and in responses to open-ended survey questions, people offered nuanced perspectives about how the intersection of race, ethnicity, and class shapes their sense of self as Jews. They shared social analyses developed through their formal and informal education, their socialization as BIPOC, and their lived experiences as Jews. For many respondents, this process was intertwined with a growing awareness of the political dimensions of identity.

I was not born socially-conscious overnight. It took a lot of personal work and a lot of personal learning for me to get to the viewpoints and the place that I am today. Generally speaking, American Jewish institutions are just a little bit slower themselves.

🗨️ A Black, East Indian and Ashkenazi man in his 30s

In college I learned about what it means to be a feminist and how I had internalized a lot of patriarchy. I tried to show up to a couple of Jewish things at college but they didn't have any real frame for a Black kid showing up, so I stopped participating in Jewish communal life until my 20s. Graduate school was about realizing that I was Black in a lot of ways. I went from identifying as mixed to identifying as Black, as an intentional political choice. The fact that I was a Black woman and I was Jewish did not intersect at all during that time.

🗨️ A white and African American woman in her 30s

Colorism

Many interview respondents also mentioned their experiences of colorism: how social hierarchy is assigned to people of different skin tones, with greater privilege and access to social capital afforded to those who have lighter skin compared to those who are darker.²⁸ They described how the nuances of racial identity politics and light skin privilege have played out within Jewish and non-Jewish communities of color. Experiences of colorism reinforce the dualities that characterize the lived experiences of Jews of Color.

I'm pretty passing; I'm pretty ambiguous. I can look white to certain people, so I didn't get the same kind of invasive questioning or security called on me the way that Black Jews experience, because I have privilege. That being said, it doesn't mean that I don't feel erased and unseen as an Asian American.

🗨️ A Chinese and Ashkenazi woman in her 20s

As a white passing Latinx Jew, I am often in liminal spaces both in predominantly white spaces and JoC spaces. I totally understand the white skin privilege that I have and also understand how racialization works to make me feel like I don't belong in either white or JoC spaces. I was recently questioned about my claim to a JoC identity by another white passing Latinx person in very uncomfortable ways.

🗨️ A Hispanic or Latina/o/x and nonbinary/Two-Spirit/third gender person in their 30s

Double Consciousness

Respondents described a heightened sense of awareness about how they are seen by others. They mentioned feeling scrutinized because of their race in some settings and because of their Jewishness in others. This can be usefully understood through W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of "double consciousness."²⁹ The term describes the way that marginalized people, specifically Black/African American people, navigate the hazards of American racism by "looking at one's self through the eyes of others."

Many respondents shared how they consciously compartmentalize parts of themselves in order to reduce the stress of double consciousness. They recounted stories in which mentioning they are Jewish in non-Jewish BIPOC spaces evoked unwelcome provocations about Israel-Palestine, micro-aggressions, overt anti-Semitism, and pronouncements about the consequences of not accepting Jesus.

When I moved, I started going to a new synagogue and trying to integrate into the local Jewish community. At times, I've had to compartmentalize sides of myself because it's just so mentally exhausting facing the 'What are you?' questions.

☑ A mixed, Native American, Indigenous, and Navajo woman in her 30s

66% agree:

They have felt disconnected from their Jewish identities at times.

24% strongly agree and 42% agree

45% agree:

They have altered how they speak, dress, or present themselves in predominately white Jewish spaces.

16% strongly agree and 29% agree

Among white people, I have to have my defenses up so in white dominant spaces, when I prayed or celebrated, I was too defended to really have a full spiritual experience. But among JoC, I can do that.

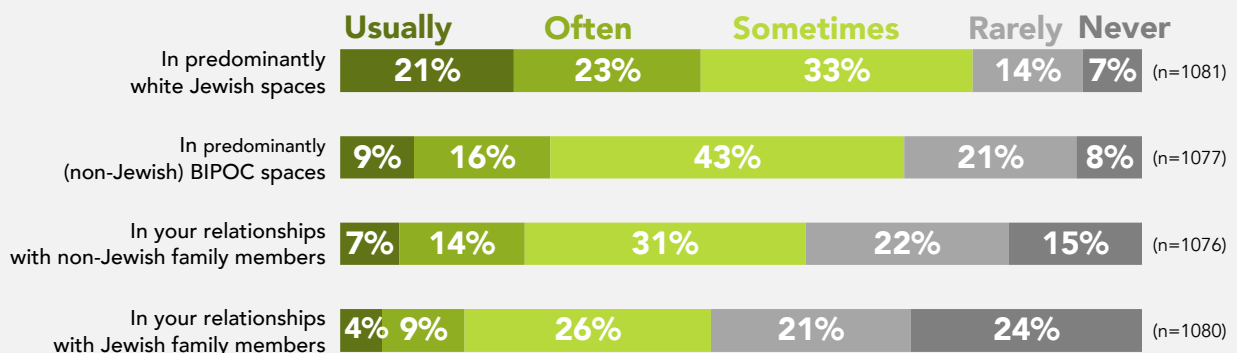
🗨️ A mixed Black and Jewish man in his 30s

As a mixed person/biracial person, it's sometimes easier to cover up one identity and just go with whichever identity seems the most privileged.

🗨️ An African American and white woman in her 20s

Respondents find it more difficult for their identities to co-exist in predominantly white Jewish spaces than in BIPOC spaces. They feel more comfortable expressing their full selves with Jewish family members than with non-Jewish family members

How often, if at all, is it difficult for your various identities to co-exist when you are...



Israel-Palestine

Study participants represented a range of perspectives about how their relationships with Israel factor into their identities as Jews of Color. Survey respondents were fairly evenly divided with respect to how important they felt “caring about Israel” was to their Jewish identities. Nearly one third of survey respondents indicated that “caring about Israel” was “very important” (32%). Another third responded that it was “moderately important” (16%), or “somewhat important” (19%). The final third indicated “caring about Israel” is “not too important” (14%) or “not at all important” (18%). A survey respondent who is an Asian or Asian American, white or European American, biracial, multiracial, and mixed man in his 40s volunteered a comment to clarify that when he indicated that “caring about Israel” was “somewhat important,” he meant,

I care about Israel like I care about the US, as a site where there are injustices happening that I care about.

Interviews provided richness and depth which elucidated this range of perspectives. Some said they felt more at home in Israel, given its relative distance from American racial politics. Others described how living in Israel helped them better understand their experience as JoC in the United States. A Hispanic or Latina/o/x, Native American, First Nation or Indigenous American, and mixed woman in her 70s explained,

I was always like two people – Jewish and Chicano – even as a volunteer leader in my shul. Then I made aliyah and in Israel, I never felt anything other than Jewish.

Still others shared painful personal stories of racism they endured while visiting or living in Israel. With dismay, a Black woman in her 70s mentioned that she was unsure how she would be received in Israel, clarifying,

If things get much worse in this country and my wife and I had to move for our safety, I'm not sure I could get into Israel because of the racial thing. That's a reason I've been looking for Jews of Color. If we can't be admitted to Israel in a time of crisis, at least we'll have each other.

For 18% of respondents, “Caring about Israel” is a not at all important expression of their Jewish identities



Israel-Palestine

Respondents' perspectives on the Israel-Palestine conflict have also resulted in their feeling marginalized by both their non-Jewish BIPOC communities and their Jewish communities. A mixed, Native American/Indigenous, Navajo woman in her 30s explained,

- ☑ **A lot of Native Americans in general are pro-Palestinian. And so the idea of me supporting Israel as a Jewish state is really hard for a lot of people to accept.**

At times, simply mentioning their Jewish identity prompted uncomfortable and unwanted debates about Israel-Palestine. Some respondents actively avoided the awkward conversations they anticipated by not sharing their Jewish identity in certain settings. Yet some also described how not mentioning their Jewish identity had exposed them to criticisms of Israel laced with anti-Semitic tropes.

Still others drew a strong connection between their solidarity with Palestinians and their JoC/BIPOC identities. A Hispanic or Latina/o/x, white or European American, biracial, multiracial, and mixed woman in her 40s asserted,

- ☑ **My anti-Zionism is definitely tied to my status as a person of color.**

In predominantly white Jewish contexts, many respondents chose to censor their critical perspectives about Israel-Palestine for self-protection. A Japanese and white woman in her 20s said she avoided talking about Israel-Palestine with Jewish colleagues, explaining,

- ☞ **I get really uncomfortable talking about Israel. The politics are so closely ingrained with their identity, so any critique of the politics is seen as a critique of who Jews are.**

I don't want to actively avoid Israel as part of my Judaism, but it's uncomfortable, so it hasn't been part of my life so far.

Several described how in some circles, support for the State of Israel felt like a "litmus test" that would determine whether or not they were "good Jews" or "Jewish enough." Out of fear she would be further marginalized in her predominantly white Jewish community, a Black, African, or African American woman in her 30s shared how she felt pressured to keep her politics about Israel-Palestine to herself. She explained,

- ☑ **I'm a convert and not fully white, so I don't "look" Jewish. As a leftist Jew, I feel a lot of solidarity with the people of Palestine, but in predominantly Zionist spaces, I have to hide what I believe, lest I be called out as a fake, insincere convert.**

Another sentiment expressed by several respondents was the experience of feeling overlooked across communities. A Black and mixed-race woman in her 30s shared her experience of feeling doubly marginalized,

- ☞ **When Black Lives Matter put out their policy platform, it said something about Palestine, and the Jews flipped out. Black people were all of a sudden fighting with Jews. And nobody thought to say, 'Hey, Black Jews. What do y'all think? Can y'all help us?'**

For many JoC, regardless of their political perspectives or the tenor of their relationships with Israel, the racialized politics of Israel-Palestine force them to make choices about when or how to speak out.

Terminology

Respondents had nuanced perspectives about their identities as JoC. Some respondents described how the label can become a barrier to belonging. An Asian or Asian American, white or European American, biracial, and mixed man in his 30s explained,

- I often feel like I'm not 'of color' enough to talk about being a Jew of Color, though I am one. It's hardest for my identities to coexist in those moments when I'm classified into a group whose experiences I'm not sure I share and in whose marginalization I worry I inadvertently participate.**

Many others recognized the term as a flawed, but nevertheless useful shorthand for identifying and describing people whose experiences have been largely overlooked and unacknowledged in studies of American Jewish identity. An Asian or Asian American, white or European American, multiracial person in their 20s with their gender not listed explained,

- I think that the category of Jew of Color is an important one but also a limited one. I think it is a politicized identity within Jewish spaces especially, but that it should be theorized more as a coalition of many different groups who share certain similar experiences and political struggles. I hesitate to reify it as a solid and concrete category.**

Some expressed concerns about how the term JoC obscures the wide array of distinctions among people in the population it aims to describe. A Black, African, or African American and Hispanic or Latina/o/x man in his 30s admonished,

- "People of Color" and "Jew of Color" are uselessly broad terms to combine completely unrelated experiences. I am an Afro-Latino convert and my experience is vastly and fundamentally different from a Mizrahi Jew, yet we're collapsed into the same category.**

An Ashkenazi and Filipina woman in her 20s articulated how this complexity can manifest in JoC spaces:

- I've been in a lot of JoC situations where it really feels like 'Oh my gosh, we're so alike. This feels so good.' And then you walk out of the room and you're like, 'Oh, except for when that person said that really fucked-up anti-Black or transphobic or ableist thing.'**

A Hispanic or Latina/o/x and mixed woman in her 30s cautioned:

- I find the term quite honestly divisive. I am Hispanic and I am Jewish. Words matter and the discourse, I believe, has gone from a place of good intention to potentially causing further divisions and harm.**

Respondents objected to the implication of unity or uniformity based on a reductive sense of shared "non-whiteness." Several noted that dividing Jews into two populations – "Jews" and "Jews of Color" – implies whiteness as "normative," and thus reinforces American racial hierarchy. A Black, African, or African American, white or European American, biracial, multiracial, and mixed woman in her 40s challenged,

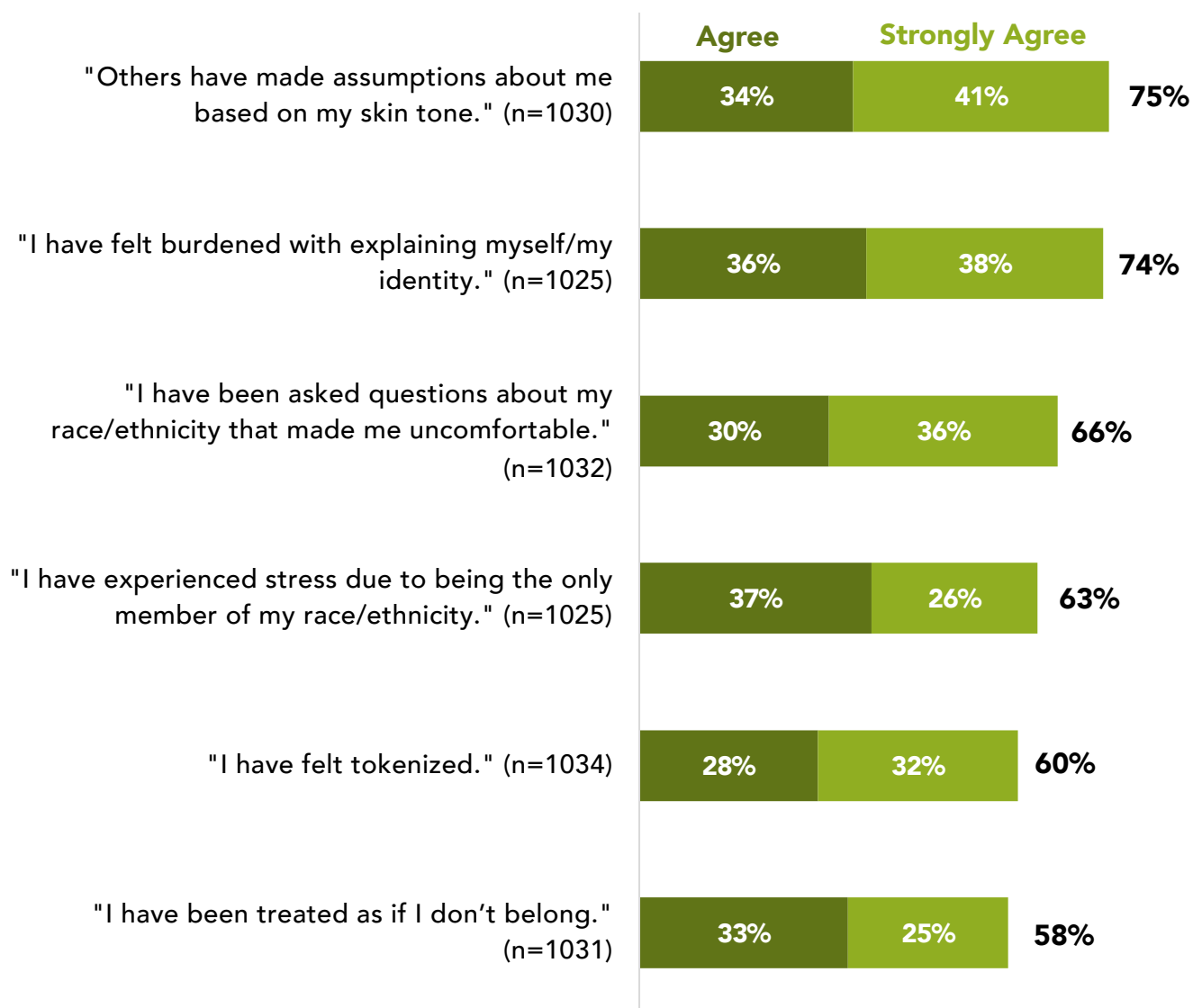
- I hate being included by negation because I am other than... Other than what? Real Jews? I am just a Jew and I don't feel like I should need an adjective to define it any more than white people do. Are whites 'Jews of whiteness'? Of course not because they're white so people just accept it. But because my skin color isn't white I'm something other than just a Jew.**

Racism & Discrimination

In data gathered from both the survey and interviews, JoC reported being personally subjected or witnesses to racist and discriminatory treatment in Jewish organizations, from synagogues and schools to professional settings. Their experiences took the form of both microaggressions and overt challenges to the validity of their Jewish identities. In Jewish communal settings, JoC have been ignored, or conversely, showered with unwanted attention.

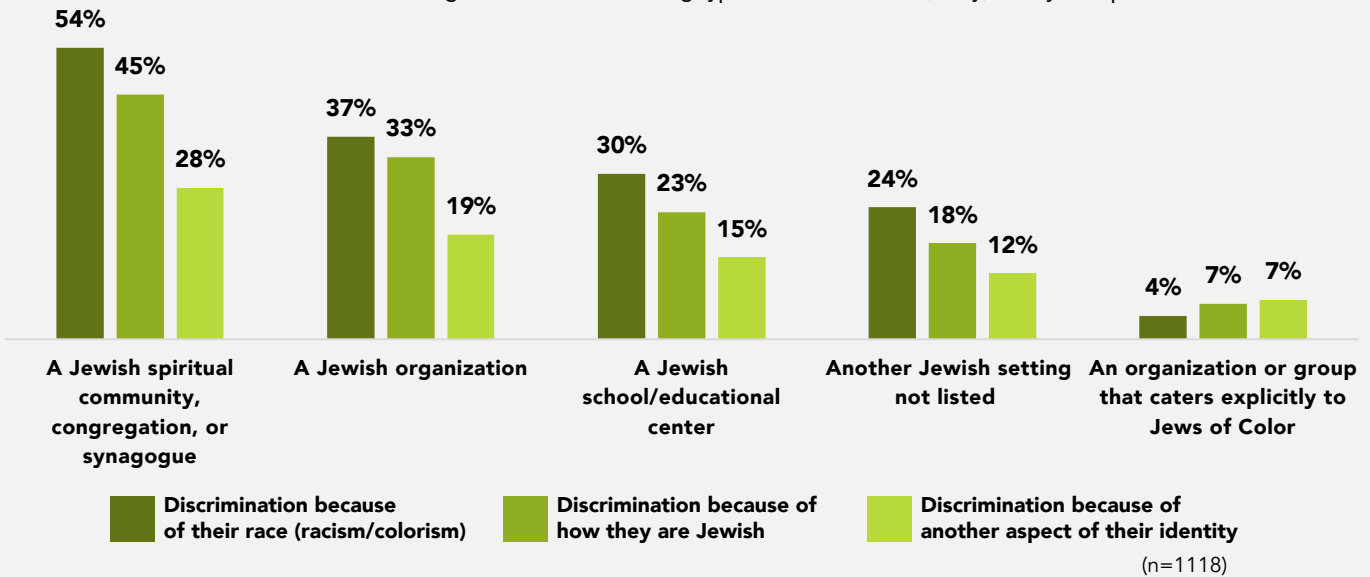
Respondents described the variety of assumptions made about them. They have been repeatedly mistaken for security guards or nannies and presumed to be the non-Jewish partner or guest of a white Jewish person. In misguided efforts to make their community more accessible and welcoming, JoC have been offered unsolicited explanations about Jewish rituals and practices, or have been asked intrusive questions about how they became Jewish.

The majority of survey respondents agreed they have had a wide range of negative experiences in Jewish communal settings.



The vast majority of survey respondents (80%) agreed they have experienced discrimination in Jewish settings. The largest percentage of respondents reported experiencing discrimination in a Jewish spiritual community, congregation, or synagogue. Just 20% have not experienced discrimination in Jewish settings.

For each of these Jewish settings, which of the following types of discrimination (if any) have you experienced?



For years, I refused to belong to a formal congregation because of my experiences with racism within formal Jewish spaces. After 20 years away, now I have a Jewish community where there are a lot of adoptees of color, which means that the community has had to negotiate race/racism in ways that have been productive for the sake of the next generation. The congregation and the rabbi are incredibly conscientious and the commitment to anti-racism is part of the organization's work. This has been the first formal Jewish space where I have felt comfortable in years. Even so, I have had to deal with some racism from some members of the congregation, which sometimes keeps me at home.

A Black, African, or African American, Hispanic or Latina/o/x, Native American, First Nation or Indigenous American, multiracial and mixed woman in her 40s

I am often treated like a person just learning about Judaism instead of a Jew who is active in many communities. I went to Shabbat services recently, and a woman came up to me and said, without introducing herself, 'Shabbat Shalom. So are you here for a religion class? Did you convert?'

An African American and Black man in his 30s

When I was doing Jewish leadership training, there was this guy who asked me twice if I could get him something and I told him, 'I don't work here, I'm attending.' And 20 minutes later, he asked me the same question. And I told him to stop and really look at me, because this is the second and last time I'm saying this: I'm here. I'm a participant. I'm a Jew.

An African American and Cherokee woman in her 60s