

From: Jeffrey Rosenberg
Sent: Thursday, January 21, 2021 5:06 AM
To: Ethnic Studies
Cc: CFIRD
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Jewish Ethnic Identification

Dear Ethnic Studies and Curriculum Frameworks and Instructional Resources Division,
שלום. (Shalom.) My name is Jeffrey Rosenberg, I am a Jewish filmmaker and independent scholar of Jewish and Intercultural identity studies. I live in the Mid-Wilshire/Fairfax area of Los Angeles, CA, (90036), which comprises many demographics, but also has a very large and diverse Jewish community. After reviewing your draft of the “Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum”—especially certain passages within Appendix A—I have found some inconsistencies with your analyses on Jewish racial identity and would request that you allow for more time, input on, and changes to your draft. First, as you in fact partly noted, Jews (B’Nei Y’Israel) are a Diasporic, Semitic (Afro-Asiatic, North-Northeast African, Southwest Asian, “Middle Eastern,” etc.), ethnocultural/ethnoreligious Tribe/“race”/People of Color—regardless of whether or not any specific individuals have “white passing” privilege—who are ALL Tribally Indigenous to the region of Canaan (Eretz Y’Israel), including Ashkenazim.

Second, most Ashkenazim—Jews whose Semitic ancestors the Romans enslaved and dispersed throughout the Roman Empire (Eban, Abba “Heritage: Civilization and the Jews,” 87) and had to settle in central and eastern European regions—have genetic ties to the Levant, as well as often have “Middle Eastern” phenotypical traits (darker skin/eyes, dark, curly/kinky hair, rounder and larger facial/body features, etc.). In addition, many Ashkenazim may have Sephardi and/or Mizrahi ancestry/admixture/DNA depending on further sub-Diasporas (e.g. the Spanish Inquisition) (<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/actually-a-significant-number-of-ashkenazim-are-descended-from-sephardim/>).

In your Appendix A, lines 10259 – 10265, you falsely describe Mizrahi and Sephardi Jews as the only “Jewish Middle Eastern Americans,” which grossly excludes Ashkenazim whose ancestors were largely persecuted for BEING MIDDLE EASTERN in Europe AND may have mixed Sephardi heritage. PLEASE illuminate students on the specific histories/heritages of Sephardim and Mizrahim WITHOUT EXCLUDING learning of Ashkenazim’s non-“white” histories/heritages. Ashkenazim are a People of Color, having acted and been treated as People of Color, and having fought for the rights of Other/Intersecting Peoples of Color in various societies.

Third, Jews’ ethnogenesis—with one side being genetic markers/haplotypes (e.g. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0002929707613251>), and the other being Jews’ languages (Aramaic, Hebrew, Yiddish, Ladino, Judeo-Persian, and more), religion, dietary laws, core political/philosophical beliefs, etc.—originated in the Levant (the “Middle East”). From Tribal inception, Jews have been and continue to be One People with many and Intersecting branches. Some Jews are “new” members who have joined the Tribe from non-Semitic origins, but through “conversion,” become ethnoculturally (Tribally) Semitic through their newly adopted Jewish culture/identity (in name, language, cuisine, core political/philosophical beliefs, religion, fashion/garments, etc.). Such new Tribal members include: Jamaica Kincaid, Sammy Davis, Jr., Zooey Deschanel, Isla Fisher. Jamaica Kincaid famously explained of her adopted Jewish heritage: “People ask me if I’m still a Jew and it’s like, do you think Judaism is a fashionable skirt?” Kincaid’s question points to how Jewish Tribal “conversion” is more than just a religious commitment, but an Ethnocultural binding to the Children of Israel (B’Nei Y’Israel).

People who join the Tribe (as those listed above), or who have further mixed genetic heritage (e.g. Lenny Kravitz, Tim Wise, Rabbi Angela Warnick Buchdahl, Adam Goldberg (from *The Hebrew Hammer*)),

and add external (non-Jewish) cultural customs to the larger Jewish community ALL INTERSECT Semitic, Jewish heritage/culture AND their additional “racial” designations. Someone can be both “Black and Jewish,” “Korean and Jewish,” “English and Jewish,” or even “Mexican, Guatemalan, French, and Jewish,” but never a “white” Jew.

Something you may not know, but the Nazis described non-Jewish German scientists (i.e. “white” Germans) who supported Jewish scientists’ theories as “white” Jews

(<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-2-pro-nazi-nobelists-attacked-einstein-s-jewish-science-excerpt1/>). To me, that fact further emphasizes the importance of not describing Jews as

“white,” because that should be reserved for people who are European; otherwise, one risks “whitewashing” some Jews with the dominant societies who rejected them (i.e. historical Oppressors) as outsiders.

If we examine the term “white,” then we will often find that in a racial sense, “white” means “European” (or being related to European culture/heritage); consequently, we must emphasize that Jewish culture at large—although some Jewish communities have adopted external non-Semitic traditions—is inherently a Middle Eastern culture, and not European. Your draft even cites several historical examples of how the dominant cultures of Europe (and USA) extensively racialized and Institutionally victimized Ashkenazim, resulting in/furthering exiles, pogroms, and genocides (Chapter 3, lines 660-661; Appendix A, lines 10296-10301, 10385-10387, 10437-10450, 10676-10681, 10689-10693, and more).

In addition, if you did not know, but in 1909, it was Lebanese American George Shishim and a group of Arab Americans who successfully lobbied for Middle Eastern Americans to be considered “white” in the United States of America (<https://www.arabamericanhistory.org/archives/dept-of-justice-affirms-arab-race-in-1909/>); the crux of Shishim’s argument: “Jesus” was from the same land as he was. Logically, if the figure “Jesus” was to have existed, then he would have been a Jew, and thus “Middle Eastern,” and therefore so would be all Jews with genetic and cultural ties to the Middle East (Ashkenazim, Sephardim, Mizrahim, Beta Israel & Bal Ej (Ethiopian Jews), and more).

Some people base the concept of “race” on rough appearance (i.e. skin tone), whereas others include other factors such as other physical features (e.g. hair type/tone, facial and body shapes/sizes, etc.) as well as cultural features (e.g. language, dietary laws, core philosophies, religion, fashion/garments, etc.), and even others include genealogical (family tree) analysis. Nevertheless, based on appearance alone, ALL Peoples of Color have individuals who may “pass-for-white,” and thus “conditional whiteness” (also known as “white-passing privilege”), including many Sephardi, Mizrahi, Black, Latinx, Native/Indigenous American, East and South Asian, and Arab individuals; meanwhile many Ashkenazim “pass” for Other/Intersecting Peoples of Color, including “passing” for Black, Arab, Latinx, South Asian, and more. So, to isolate and “whitewash” all “white-passing” Ashkenazim as “white,” as opposed to being “of Color,” unnecessarily ostracizes and hypocritically/arbitrarily applies a double standard to only Ashkenazi Jews that can also easily be applied to Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews.

Ashkenazim should not be subjected to abnormal consideration that Other/Intersecting Peoples of Color do not, let alone Other/Intersecting Jewish communities do not, especially when most Ashkenazim descend from Indigenous Jewish slaves subjugated under various forms of European Imperialism. Please do not make Jews outsiders within their own communities by mislabeling Jews’ sub-communities.

Thank you for your consideration, and please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey Gordon Rosenberg