

OPINION

GUEST ESSAY

Why Did George Santos Lie About Being Jewish?

Jan. 4, 2023 Mark Oppenheimer

Mr. Oppenheimer is the host of the podcast “Gatecrashers: The Hidden History of Ivy League Jews” and the author of “Squirrel Hill: The Tree of Life Synagogue Shooting and the Soul of a Neighborhood.”



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I know I should be horrified by the revelations about George Santos, the representative-elect from Queens who seems to have embellished or invented everything about himself except his name. But truth be told, I can't get enough of this guy.

I love that he dragged [Goldman Sachs](#) into his sordid story by putting the investment bank on his fanciful résumé. I really love that his dubious

philanthropic credentials included founding [Friends of Pets United](#), which, if a pro-animal group, raises interesting modifier questions — Were they friends only of united pets? What about the lonely, solitary pets? — but which actually sounds like a cult for dog lovers, one I would happily join.

And I really, *really* love that he claimed to have Jewish ancestry.

This was the lie that his (Catholic) grandparents were Jewish Holocaust refugees who fled to Brazil. Once the truth came out, he defended himself by [telling](#) The New York Post that he “never claimed to be Jewish” but only “Jew-ish.”

But there’s more that draws me to this case than Mr. Santos’s way with the truth. After all, he is not the first politician to seek advantage by merely saying he is Jewish (in his case, dishonestly).

How can this be? After all, this is a time of rising antisemitism. There’s a lot of bad news out there for us: the [Tree of Life](#) shooting, [Ye](#), the [hostage-taking](#) at a Texas synagogue, the [spike](#) in attacks on observant Jews. And yet public figures still come out as public Jews.

I am reminded of the joke, purportedly told in prewar Germany, about the Jew who likes reading the Nazi newspaper. When asked why, he says that the Jewish papers carry news only about Jews being beaten and ostracized. “But in Der Stürmer, I read that we control the banks, the media, everything!”

That’s what it’s like to read about George Santos lying in a campaign position paper about being a “[proud American Jew](#).” He seems to think being Jewish makes you more popular! Some good news!

Still, why do it? Politicians — by nature, canny operators all — must sense that there is some political advantage in being identified as having Jewish heritage. And in New York, there generally is. Remember that Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez proudly claimed her Jewish ancestry the month after her election to Congress in 2018, when she [told](#) a Queens synagogue that “generations and generations ago” her “family consisted of Sephardic Jews.”

That was mere months after Tablet magazine [reported](#) that Julia Salazar, who was running for the New York State Senate as a politically progressive

Jew and claimed a mixed Jewish-Catholic background, “appears to have had a Christian upbringing.” She [spoke to reporters](#) about going through a conversion to Judaism in college, around the time she became embedded deeply in New York City’s [robust left-Jewish community](#).

Gentile politicians in Arkansas are not bragging about Jewish ancestry. But in Brooklyn or Queens or out on Long Island? There are Jews, and they vote.

Jewishness — or *Jew-ish-ness*? — can bring one closer to powerful activist groups, can help give one a constituency. For Mr. Santos, having a Jewish identity made him a shinier object for the Republican Party, which for decades has been trying, and failing, to peel Jews away from the Democratic fold. (After the revelations about Mr. Santos’s fibbing, the Republican Jewish Coalition [said](#) that Mr. Santos “will not be welcome at any future R.J.C. event,” which hardly seems like a punishment.)

It’s noteworthy that in many cases claiming to *be* a Jew doesn’t seem to benefit, exactly — but having a whiff of Jewish heritage or ancestry does. That stands to reason because in politics or in celebrity, there is no such thing as bad ancestry. Being 1/128th Native American or part Romani or a smidgen Jewish — they all lend a little flavor, liven up a staid image. Actually being a current, practicing, engaged member of the group? Less appealing. A practicing, Sabbath-observant Jew makes some people suspicious; being a secular American who happens to have had a great-great-grandfather who was a shtetl rabbi is a cool biographical fact.

To quote the title of Dara Horn’s essay collection, [people love dead Jews](#). Having a dead Jew in your past is swell. George Santos invented his past in business because he hoped it would make him seem successful. He invented dead Jews to make himself seem sympathetic or interesting.

Still, I am a little wary of calling out Mr. Santos for culturally appropriating Jewishness, for trying to assimilate himself to my people, because we Jews are always trying to assimilate people to us. In the words of Adam Sandler, in his Hanukkah-song roll call of famous Jews, “Harrison Ford’s a quarter Jewish — not too shabby” (and he’s actually [half Jewish](#)). There’s nothing a Jew likes more than welcoming to the club a celebrity with surprise Jewish ancestry.

But that's an invitation offered, tongue in cheek, by Jews. It's like the MacArthur "genius" grant: You don't apply; you just get contacted. (I'm still [waiting](#) for my phone call.) If you do want to apply, or be accepted as a member of the community, then there are many ways in — but all of them involve being serious, not opportunistic; caring not just about your DNA or ancestry, but about the living community of Jews. You can be serious in many ways: praying with us, studying with us, learning how to cook with us, doing political organizing with us, converting to be one of us.

And for those who feel "Jew-ish," either because they had lots of Jewish friends in college or because they discovered a Jewish great-great-grandparent, even though every relative since the Civil War has been Christian: Maybe keep quiet about it? Or just say you're a friend of the Jews — you could even found Friends of Jews United, which, like Friends of Pets United, may not exist, but definitely should.

Mark Oppenheimer is the host of the podcast ["Gatecrashers: The Hidden History of Ivy League Jews"](#) and the author of *"Squirrel Hill: The Tree of Life Synagogue Shooting and the Soul of a Neighborhood."* He formerly wrote the *Beliefs* column for *The Times*.