

Are Jews a Race?

Whoopi Goldberg's Holocaust comments reflect how Jews don't fit into Western boxes

By Yair Rosenberg FEBRUARY 01, 2022



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Yesterday, celebrated actor and TV host Whoopi Goldberg caused a minor meltdown on ABC's *The View* when she [asserted](#) that the Holocaust "isn't about race." Later that day, she joined *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert* and [expanded](#) on these remarks in an uncomfortable exchange, insisting that "the Nazis were white people, and most of the people they were attacking were white people."

As countless commentators pointed out, this line of thinking is profoundly mistaken. The Nazis were [obsessed with race](#) and defined the

Jews as their racial inferiors, which is how they justified exterminating them. This is why the Nazis targeted anyone with a Jewish grandparent, regardless of whether the person identified as Jewish or not. Nazism was a blood-based doctrine of racial supremacy, and its consequence was the genocide of the Jews. The very term *anti-Semitism*, which casts Jews in racial terms, was [popularized](#) by a German anti-Jewish activist who wanted to give his hatred a scientific sheen. Race is a social construct, and this is how it was constructed in Nazi Germany and much of Europe.

To her credit, Goldberg [apologized](#) last night on Twitter, and then again this morning on *The View*, alongside Jonathan Greenblatt from the Anti-Defamation League, who [talked through](#) the issue with the panelists.



Whoopi Goldberg

@WhoopiGoldberg



On today's show, I said the Holocaust "is not about race, but about man's inhumanity to man." I should have said it is about both. As Jonathan Greenblatt from the Anti-Defamation League shared, "The Holocaust was about the Nazi's systematic annihilation of the Jewish people – who they deemed to be an inferior race." I stand corrected.

The Jewish people around the world have always had my support and that will never waiver. I'm sorry for the hurt I have caused.

Written with my sincerest apologies,
Whoopi Goldberg

8:15 PM · Jan 31, 2022



59.6K



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How Do You Define Jews?

Goldberg is not an anti-Semite, but she was confused—and understandably so. In my experience, mistakes like hers often happen because well-meaning people have trouble fitting Jews into their usual boxes. They don't know how to define Jews, and so they resort to their own frames of reference, like “race” or “religion,” and project them onto the Jewish experience. But Jewish identity doesn't conform to Western categories, despite centuries of attempts by society to shoehorn it in. This makes sense, because Judaism predates Western categories. It's not quite a religion, because one can be Jewish regardless of observance or specific belief. (Einstein, for example, was [proudly Jewish](#) but not religiously observant.) But it's also not quite a race, because people can convert in! It's not merely a culture or an ethnicity, because that leaves out all the religious components. And it's not simply a nationality, because although Jews do have a [homeland](#) and many identify as part of a nation, others do not.

Instead, Judaism is an amalgam of all these things—more like a family (into which one can be adopted) than a sectarian Western faith tradition—and so there's no great way to classify it in English. A lot of confusion results from attempts to reduce this complexity to something more palatable for contemporary conceptions.

This is just my off-the-cuff explanation. One could write a book about this topic—[scholars have](#)—and still not exhaust its nuances. Over the years, smart people have used terms like “civilization” or “peoplehood” or “tribe” to describe the Jewish collective, but because those words are not as straightforward to the average person, I prefer “family.” Whichever label one employs, I hope that the above explanation provides a starting

point for those trying to understand the nature of Jewish identity, and helps them avoid the trap of imposing outside ideas on it.

Goldberg was right to apologize, and probably wishes she hadn't raised this subject. But I'm glad her misstep has provided a public opportunity to address it. We need to have more conversations about these topics going forward, not fewer. Conversation dispels confusion and leads to greater understanding, and given [recent events](#), we need a lot more understanding about Jews in our public discourse.