

A Note on Terminology: Of Jewish Names & Nomenclature, “His name suggests he was a Jew”

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Students of the history of the Black/Jewish relationship find that they must from time to time make judgments concerning the heritage of their subjects. Obviously, the relationship requires the analysis of those instances where the actions of a member or members of either group have in some way affected the other, so the religious and racial identification of the actors is necessary for the sake of accuracy.

It is taken for granted that one’s assignment to the Black race is self-evident—that is, physically obvious. With Jews being a subset of the caucasian, this identification is not physically apparent, and much more sensitive politically and socially than it is for Blacks—or any other ethnic group—amounting to a clear double standard. Jews, especially in America, have always benefited from their ability to toggle from “white” to “Jewish” when it is politically or socially advantageous. A simple query as to whether an individual is a Jew or not can be dangerous journalistic territory and is almost always left to the subject to self-identify—if he so chooses.

The external identification of a person as being a Jew is taken as an offense and invariably leads to the accusation that the labeler is “anti-Semitic.” There is no such courtesy extended to Blacks and no hesitation to identify any subject as Black in order to provide what they would call *proper context*.

In this area, and for our purposes, it is best to rely first on Jewish law, which states that a Jew is a person born to a Jewish mother. However, some Jews have added the proviso that only those raised as Jews and those who practice Judaism are considered Jewish. Second, we rely on Jewish historians who have employed various “acceptable” means for the religious categorization. Where one’s Jewishness cannot be authenticated they have often been satisfied to accept the traditional *Jewish name* of the subject as sufficient evidence to assign Jewishness. Professor Louis Ginsberg refers to “Jewish sounding names,” Samuel Proctor proclaims simply that his subject’s “names are Jewish.” In the book *Jewish Texan* it is asserted that a man is Jewish “whose name is Jewish.” Lenni Brenner finds that “many Jews are immediately identifiable by their first and/or last names, characteristic of their Jewish generation,” and so forth.

This has its limits, of course, being subject to the personal biases of the Jewish historian. The *Encyclopedia Judaica* (published in 1974), certainly an authoritative source for Jewish history, has no entry for Andrew Goodman or Michael Schwerner—the two Jews who were lynched with James Chaney in 1964. Interestingly, there is an entry for Benny Goodman and Woody Allen, two popular Jewish entertainers in that era. And though the Jewishness of Goodman and Schwerner is central to the Black and Jewish Civil Rights narrative, the most prominent Jewish historian

Jacob R. Marcus has judged the civil rights martyrs to be either not Jewish, or not Jewish enough to be included in *The Concise Dictionary of American Jewish Biography* he edited and published in 1994.

Then there are the Jewish name changes with many immigrants anglicizing their names upon their arrival in America. This was done for the purposes of assimilation, or to escape detection, given that a significant number of those from eastern Europe had deserted from the Russian military. Among those documented changes; a Greenberg became a Davis; a Garber became a Greenberg; a Yampolsky became a Davis; a Reznitzky became Rose, and on and on.

And where one finds Jewish names belonging to Blacks the method becomes invalid. In that case, it becomes substantial proof of Jewish slave ownership in the lineage of the Black person in question. Nevertheless, this method of name identification will be employed when necessary in order to provide both accuracy and *proper perspective*.

Then there are the cases where Jewish individuals have either rejected their Jewish heritage or have been rejected by a substantial part of their communities. Similarly, there are Blacks who reject their racial category or are for various reasons rejected by the Black race. Whereas this rejection may represent a psychic desire, historians—like the police—are firm on this account, taking only the physical description of the subject despite their own self-identification. To avoid the slippery slope of case by case psychoanalysis, the rigidity applied to Blacks shall, here in accordance with Jewish law, also apply to Jews.

Jewish names originate from various regions in Europe. At first the Jewish explorers and traders in the western hemisphere history had distinctly Spanish names such as Lopez, Mendez, Raphael, and Gomez. These were Sephardic Jews from the Hebrew word meaning Spain. Jews from the Slavic countries had names with suffixes "-owicz", "-ovitch", "-off", "-kin", or "ski."; and Germanic names ending in "-son", or "witz." Some had occupational names such as "Reznik", or "Shochet" which means butcher, or "Shnyder", "Kravits" or "Portnoy", all meaning tailor. Then there are religious names like "Cohen" ("Kahn", etc.), "Levine", "Segal", "Katz"; and descriptive names such as "Schwartz" meaning black, "Weiss" meaning white, "Klein" meaning small. And "ornamental names ending in "-berg", "-stein", "-feld." Jews take pride in these names and their origins. As one Jewish scholar wrote, "there were men who held proudly to their original names, whether Russian, Yiddish, or German, and these names still gleam atop department store buildings in many cities of the south."

With the exception of names within quoted sentences, non-African names used to designate an enslaved Black African will be presumed to be a label assigned by caucasians for purposes of immoral commerce in human beings, rather than the proper name assigned by the individual's family, religious order, or ancestors and thus will be encased in quotation marks.