

A Color-Blind Protest of Jewish Exceptionalism and Jim Crow

Wendy F. Soltz

Before Ibram Kendi's 2019 book, *How to Be an Antiracist*, we were often told to be color-blind with regard to race. But ignoring race, or rather assuming that everyone has the same privileges, denies identity and ends up perpetuating racism. By being an antiracist one acknowledges that racial discrimination is a universal problem and everyone must play a role to stop it within their own lives.

Almost seventy-five years before Kendi's book, Allard Kenneth Lowenstein enrolled at the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill to do just that: put an end to Jim Crow racism by protesting Jewish exceptionalism in his own life. After college, Lowenstein became a Democratic member of the US House of Representatives and was murdered in 1980, but during his college years he discovered he was part of a dormitory segregation process. It turned out that his Jewishness, a part of his identity that he wanted to shed, was a determining factor in where he slept every night. In Lowenstein's mind, this was similar to the segregation of Jews in Europe into ghettos and concentration camps as well as the segregation of Jews in a new nation-state. Furthermore, he linked this segregation of Jews to Jim Crow segregation in the South. But were they actually connected in the minds of others? If one fought against the segregation of white-skinned Jews, did that protest affect the segregation of black-skinned Southerners?

Lowenstein had always had an identity crisis. His close childhood friends stated that "the whole thing about being a Jew" caused Lowenstein a "powerful sense of inferiority." His closeted homosexuality, coupled with the stifling nature of the surrounding Jewish community, prompted Lowenstein to head South after graduating high school.

While in Chapel Hill, Lowenstein attended the Presbyterian church and the Catholic Student Center and sought out non-Jewish friendships. He avoided dating Jews and

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wrote term papers that supported intermarriage. Lowenstein also changed the pronunciation of his name to *Lowenstine* because it sounded less Jewish. Later, in oral histories, one fellow student recalled that Lowenstein "wanted to be accepted into WASP circles," in order "to be a regular fellow." Another classmate recalled, "This Jewish boy from New York knew more Southern Baptist hymns than the choir director at a tent revival." Due to the whiteness of his skin, Lowenstein was able to engage in this transformation more or less successfully.

Lowenstein's conflict with his Jewish identity led him in a fight to desegregate the dormitories at UNC. As a freshman in 1945, Lowenstein discovered that all students with Jewish-sounding names, including himself, were paired with each other in dormitory rooms. But according to university policy, rooms were to be assigned in the order in which applications were received. The policy had an additional stipulation: a student could choose his or her own roommate or request a new roommate—not by specific name, but by *type* of "what he [or she] wants as well as what he [or she] does not want." A 1942 poll surveyed American high school students about their last choice for a college roommate. Blacks and Jews were at the top of the list with Catholics and Chinese tied for distant third. Therefore, it would have been common for UNC students to write "Not Jewish" on their housing applications. The stipulation in the policy also allowed Jewish students to choose a Jewish roommate, and some likely did.

But would *all* Jewish students make this choice? Lowenstein was positive that the university was not following the policy and was actively segregating Jews. It was quite

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the Zionist concept of Jewish 'differentness' is wrong ... the whole fight is one and should be won, with a goal of One Society in One world." In his mind, fighting to desegregate the UNC dormitories and speaking out against Zionism was bucking Jim Crow in the South.

While it seems that Lowenstein's protest helped to stop top-down segregation of Jewish students, UNC still segregated Black students upon arrival. In 1951, the law school admitted two Black students, Kenneth Lee and Harvey Beech, and administration assigned them rooms in segregated dormitories. Three years later, when asked to comment on why more Black students continued to be isolated, the UNC president at the time, Gordon Gray, responded, "I just don't remember. I doubt that the Board of Trustees made the decision [to segregate them]."

Despite this claim, a UNC housing officer insisted that he had received instructions to reserve empty rooms for incoming Black students in a specific dormitory, even though there was a waiting list of white students for dormitory accommodations. It is unclear exactly when this segregation ceased but the *Daily Tar Heel*, UNC's student-run newspaper, reported it continued well into the 1980s.

While at first glance, Lowenstein's actions appear to be antiracist, he unfortunately remained color-blind. This color-blindness likely prevented his protest for Jewish students from making an impact on the lives of Black students years later. The UNC administration did not connect Jewish segregation to Jim Crow in the same way he did; many would still agree today. White and Black divisions are such an ingrained custom in the United States to this day that a victory for Jews, with white-skin privileges, often does not result in a similar win for Blacks.

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6 ART CONTRIBUTOR: EMILY MARBACH

Let My People Go, 2020. Mixed media collage on paper. 16.5 x 11.5 in. © 2020 Emily Marbach. Courtesy of the artist.

easy for administration to know who among the students was Jewish (roughly 6 percent of the student body) because several university forms required students to list their religious preference. When asked about Jewish segregation, UNC staff replied that they had an unofficial policy, of sorts, to assign Jewish students to rooms with other Jewish students. Upon hearing this, UNC president Frank Porter Graham declared the situation a disgrace and demanded the university stop segregation immediately.

But this win was just the beginning for Lowenstein. He believed that all types of segregation were interconnected and should be abolished. Maintaining separate dormitories for Jews was simply a microcosm of the ghettoization of Jews and the creation of a separate nation-state for Jews. He wrote a letter to President Truman stating that Zionism was wrong and that refugees should be sent to other places around the world, not just Palestine. Lowenstein argued in term papers that, "Jim Crow is a wrong ...