

Alex Edelman

JUST FOR US

DISCUSSION AND LEARNING GUIDE

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

We have identified four topics that feature prominently in *Just For Us*: **Jewish humor, empathy, Jews and Whiteness, and antisemitism and White nationalism**. For each subject, we have provided historical context and discussion questions to help guide a conversation or aid in your personal reflection.



1. JEWISH HUMOR

In *Just For Us*, Alex makes several jokes poking fun at his own actions, his family, his childhood, and, above all, his Jewishness. For many, these may be seen as quintessential examples of a long held tradition of Jewish humor. That begs the question - where does this tradition come from?

In 1978, [Time Magazine published an article](#) claiming that despite only comprising 3% of the population, Jews made up 80% of the professional comedians at the time. While that figure is almost certainly exaggerated, it highlights an important cultural narrative that has persisted - that Jews and comedy are inextricably linked. In fact, a [2013 survey by the Pew Research Center](#) found that 42% of American Jews rated humor as essential to their Jewish identity. However, comedians and scholars have long grappled with how to quantify this relationship. Is there really such a thing as “Jewish humor”? If so, where does it come from and how is it defined?

There are some that point to passages in the Bible and Jewish customs such as the [Purim Spiel](#), the yearly retelling of the Book of Esther made lively with costumes and noisemakers, as evidence that Jewish humor can be traced back to the “beginning” of Judaism as we understand it. Some Jewish psychologists, such as Sigmund Freud, suggest that Jewish humor has historically been a survival tactic by Jews - altering their perspectives and engaging in self-mockery to soften external hostility. American Studies scholar Allen Guttman instead posits that the origin of Jewish-American comedy as we understand it can be found in the Yiddish writers of the 19th century. To an extent he is not wrong, the influx of Jewish immigrants to the United States in the early 20th century brought about the birth of the American film industry, which in turn shaped entertainment into what it is today.

Discuss:

What has shaped your personal relationship to comedy? How does Alex explore the relationship between his Judaism and his comedy in *Just For Us*?

2. EMPATHY

According to ancient Jewish wisdom, all human beings are created b'tselem elohim - in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Jewish tradition even goes so far as to say that “to destroy a human life, is to destroy an entire world.” With such an emphasis on the critical importance of human worth, it is no wonder that Alex emphasizes “empathy” as a core value to his Jewish upbringing.

As with most values however, there are situations that test the limits of one's values. In the show, Alex playfully analyzes the moment of empathy he feels for the very group of white supremacists who would wish him harm if they knew he was Jewish. This situation brings up some very real questions for us regarding the limits of our own empathy.

Discuss:

Are there limits to empathy? Should there be? What are possible areas where you can lean into greater empathy and connection with people you disagree with? What perspectives are “bright red lines” that you refuse to cross for empathy's sake?



3. JEWS AND WHITENESS

Race is a social construct, [not a biological one](#). While this statement might be a cliché in some circles, what it means is that human beings are genetically [99.9% similar](#) to one another, and that there is no meaningful difference embedded in a person's skin color. The social, psychological, and material impacts that have accumulated from centuries of perceived racial difference, however, are quite real - as has been evidenced with the enduring impact of slavery and Jim Crow on Black American communities.

The historical Jewish-American experience with race has been complicated, to say the least. In pre-modern Europe, Jews were not only considered racially different, they endured millennia of persecution based on wild conspiracy theories. In early America, things were only modestly better. Prior to the mid-19th century, Jews of Ashkenazi and Sephardic descent (see glossary) in America were still widely considered to be non-White.

While some of them found early paths to achievement, a majority of these Jewish immigrants were systematically denied privileges. With the arrival of the 20th century, however, the Jewish American experience shifted from one of widescale struggle to one of expanding opportunity and social mobility. Today, many of those same Jews who would have been considered non-White in previous centuries, would be firmly categorized as White and would have access to the opportunities that accompanied being perceived as White.

Throughout the show, Alex wrestles with the question whether or not he is "White." According to the ideology of the White supremacists at the meeting he attended, "Jews cannot be White." But according to Alex, he benefits from White privilege in many settings. In other words, for Alex and many Jews of European heritage, their Whiteness is "fluid" and depends on their broader social context.

Discuss:

How does the "fluid" history of Jews and Whiteness fit into your understanding of race in America? How is it similar to the experience of other White ethnic groups (e.g. 19th century Italian and Irish immigrants)? How is it different?

Notable Fact: Today's Jewish communities are incredibly multiracial and multiethnic. 8%-15% (i.e. 560,000-1.2 million) of America's 7-8 million Jews are also people of color. Additionally, there are significant communities across the United States of Jews whose families have deep historical ties to North Africa, West Africa, East Africa, East Asia, South Asia, Latin America and South America, spanning back hundreds and even thousands of years.

For more data and information on these communities, follow the work of [The Jews of Color Initiative](#), [Jewtina y Co.](#), [Lunar Jewish Collective](#), [The Workshop](#), and listen to the [Kitchen Radio](#) podcast from [Reboot](#).

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4. ANTISEMITISM AND WHITE NATIONALISM

In *Just For Us*, Alex recounts his experience going “undercover” at a White nationalist meeting, where he is privy to the unfiltered rhetoric that the group ascribes to. Unaware that he is Jewish, the group launches into a tirade of complaints, weaving them together with the popular White supremacist conspiracy theory that Jewish people are responsible for everything from the marriage of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle to “reverse racism” and the increased awareness of White privilege in American culture.

Eric K. Ward, civil rights strategist, scholar and expert on extremism and White nationalist movements, wrote extensively about this phenomenon in his acclaimed piece, [Skin in the Game](#). Eric spent time undercover with White nationalist groups as part of his work with the Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment in the 1990s. He found that despite the fact that he was a Black man, White supremacists were willing to welcome him into the fold in the interest of

making temporary alliances against “the real enemy.”

Eric Ward writes, “American White nationalism, which emerged in the wake of the 1960s civil rights struggle and descends from White supremacy, is a revolutionary social movement committed to building a Whites-only nation, and antisemitism forms its theoretical core. [...] To recognize that antisemitism is not a sideshow to racism within White nationalist thought is important for at least two reasons. First, it allows us to identify the fuel that White nationalist ideology uses to power its anti-Black racism, its contempt for other people of color, and its xenophobia—as well as the misogyny and other forms of hatred it holds dear.[...] This brings me to the second reason that White nationalist antisemitism must not be dismissed: at the bedrock of the movement is an explicit claim that Jews are a race of their own, and that their ostensible position as White folks in the U.S. represents the greatest trick the devil ever played.”

Discuss:

What is your initial reaction to Eric Ward’s writing? Does this resonate with your understanding of White supremacist hate-based movements? What aspects of this idea are familiar? Are there other aspects that are less familiar or entirely new?

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ABOUT REBOOT

Reboot is an arts and culture non-profit that reimagines and reinforces Jewish thought and traditions. As a premier research and development platform for the Jewish world, Reboot catalyzes its network of preeminent creators, artists, entrepreneurs and activists to produce experiences and products that evolve the Jewish conversation and transform society.

ABOUT THE SHOW

In the wake of a string of antisemitic threats pointed in his direction online, standup comic Alex Edelman decides to go straight to the source; specifically, Queens, where he covertly attends a meeting of White Nationalists and comes face-to-face with the people behind the keyboards. What happens next forms the backbone of the shockingly relevant, utterly hilarious, and only moderately perspirant stories that comprise *Just For Us*.