

We need to say goodbye to divisive identity politics

HISTORY
ROGER GRUNWALD

MISCHLINGE IS the derogatory term the Nazis used for those descended from one or two Jewish grandparents. It roughly translates as “mixed blood” or “half-breed.” Thousands of them served in the Third Reich’s armed forces.

Wait a minute... Germans of Jewish descent serving in the *Wehrmacht*? How was this possible?

For two years, I have explored this question in *The Mitzvah Project*, a one-person play that I co-authored with Annie McGreevey. As the son of two German Jews — an Auschwitz survivor and a refugee — I felt compelled to find answers, starting with the process of assimilation that many German

Jews embraced for hundreds of years, inspired by the ideas of Moses Mendelssohn, renowned philosopher, scholar and polyglot. In the late 18th century he wanted to end “the age-old social and intellectual isolation of the German Jew,” and embraced German culture.

He inspired future generations of German Jews. But, as time went on, many came to believe that the path to assimilation wasn’t just education and enlightenment but more about fully adopting the culture and attitudes of the non-Jew. Yet, even so, the Nazis said that in the *mischling*, “pure German blood” was tainted with, in their words, the Jewish bacillus. The mixing of the races was banned.

However, Germany wasn’t alone on that score. The US has a long and ugly history of laws against so-called “miscegenation,” enforced in the US until 1967 in many states.

Then there was America’s eugenics movement — promoting the superior-

ity of the so-called “white, Nordic race” and heavily influencing Congress, which passed legislation limiting the immigration of certain “undesirable” populations — Jews, Slavs and Italians. These laws also served as an inspiration for the Nazis’ Nuremberg race laws. Thirty-three states in the US also legalised the practice of forced sterilisation — led by California.

It was California’s eugenics-inspired sterilisation statute which served as the model for the Nazis’ own programme of forced sterilisation, which affected over 400,000 people.

My hope is that my play engenders conversation about the nature of prejudice, such as who decides what culture, race and ethnicity mean? And to what end? What is identity? What is the potential price of

conformism? To what end do we insist on labelling each other — anything? Whose interests are served by the ways in which we separate ourselves and set up the us-versus-them conflict, whether the “we” or “them” is a Jew, a Muslim, a Catholic, a Shia, a Sunni, a Pashtun, a Serb, a Croat, a Hutu, a Tutsi.

What will it take for human beings to let go of “identity”—which too often, over the course of history, has been little more than a weapon to destroy “the other.” And, since the time of the Holocaust, although contemporary examples of genocide don’t come anywhere

near being comparable to the Shoah, nevertheless, in the wake of Rwanda, Srebrenica, Syria, Darfur, it begs the question: can human beings learn from history and do we have the capacity, as a species, to transform — to let go of labelling ourselves and demonising others, which invariably sets up the conditions for division, hatred and genocide. Do Jews have a special role to play in this process?

Now we have learned that, over the millennia, the DNA of every human being is so intermixed with every other human being, that there is no longer — if there ever was — any pure anyone — no pure Nordic people, no pure African people, Middle Eastern people, Caucasian people, Asian people.

We’re all an amalgam. We’re all mischlings. There is no “other.” The “other” is “us.”

‘The Mitzvah Project’ will be performed at the Old Fire Station Arts Centre in Oxford on January 19 at 7.30pm

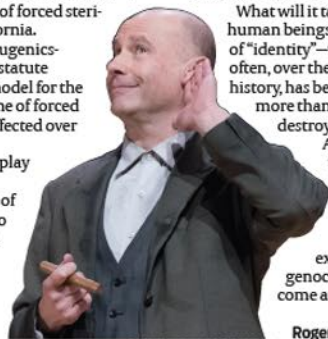


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