



RACE TO THE TOP

How in the world did I manage to convince myself that I and my family are white?

I am nothing but a backward racist. This is an insight that waylays me every so often and always finds me totally unprepared – because deep down I am convinced that I am an enlightened liberal and in no way driven by stereotypes and prejudices. On one particular morning, I was searching the Web for good schools in and around Chicago, in which to enroll my children. I don't know very much about American society in general, still less about its education system, and most of the little knowledge I do have comes from television series and the movies.

For example, I know very well that Chicago is a city to be leery of. We must be very careful in choosing the neighborhood in which we will live with our children. After all, even in Tira, my native village, whenever there is a shooting incident – and there's no shortage of them, thank God – the comment my parents use to emphasize how serious things are is, "We've turned into Chicago."

One other thing that I know about America is that there are big differences between the schools there. Some of them are expensive and private, where the students always wear an impressive school uniform. The boys come to school in suit and tie, the girls in gray skirts, a colorful scarf and jacket adorned by some sort of royal-looking symbol.

Of course, there are also bad schools, where there is violence, hooliganism, students who know nothing about politeness and have no future – at best, one of them might succeed in escaping the inferno by being admitted to one of the top universities on a sports scholarship.

My search for "schools in Illinois" immediately turned up orderly sites with ratings, achievements, number of students, and a pie chart containing data in different colors, showing the proportion of students according to race. It took me a moment to understand that I automatically ruled out schools with a high percentage of blacks, without even bothering

to check the schools' achievements or to read opinions of experts and parents. Without pausing for an instant to think, I decided that schools with the highest proportion of "white students" must be the most highly regarded institutions. Those were the ones where I figured I should check out costs, admission requirements and availability of places for my kids.

Wait a minute, I thought to myself: How exactly am I classifying myself and my children in this case? How in the world did I manage to convince myself that I and my family belong to the white race? How many layers of "reality denial" did I have to wrap myself in to reach that kind of twisted conclusion?

No, it suddenly struck me: We are definitely not white. I tried to figure out which statistical color my kids would be placed under. The tables have categories of whites, blacks, Hispanics,

Accordingly, my kids should be included in the color of the "Asiatics," in the charts showing distribution of students by race in the United States.

Indeed, "Asiatics" would be excellent for my kids. They'd automatically become brilliant in mathematics, computers and the sciences. If they want, they can instantly become gifted pianists with thick lenses in square eyeglass frames.

I blew a smoke ring, basking in this vision, which held me in thrall: about the tremendous achievements of my talented Asiatic children, who are attending the best schools in the United States. Then I remembered that my children are actually Arabs. Hollywood appeared in my mind's eye, along with images of hairy men with a scary look in their eyes that were uttering unclear guttural sounds – who turned into my kids.

In a panic, I went back to the com-

would spare them the feeling of alienation and suffocation they experience in Jerusalem, and would teach them that cosmopolitanism is an option for them. Now I started to imagine other parents sitting in front of the screen and trying to choose schools for their children, making sure to keep a Twin Towers distance from schools with a high percentage of Muslims and Arabs.

Shit, I mumbled in a southern accent and left the Web pages of race data on schools to pick up the baby from the neighborhood preschool.

"He was so cute today – just lovely," the charming preschool teacher said as my son ran to my arms and called me *abba* (Daddy, in Hebrew).

"You hear?" the teacher continued. "Every Friday we welcome the Sabbath, for the sake of the tradition, and he really likes to make challah."

"Excellent," I said to her with a smile and gave my son a kiss.

"But we also thought that maybe – one time, if you want – we can do something connected to your tradition on Friday. I'm sure it will be nice for him to see that we respect his tradition, and it will be wonderful for the children to get to know something about your customs."

"Sure," I replied to the charming teacher, unable to think of even one traditional idea. "I'll ask my wife. She's a lot more traditional."

"Wonderful," she said, and parted from us saying "*Shabbat shalom*."

"Shabbat shalom," I replied with a huge smile – because I'd just had a brilliant thought.

"You hear?" I said to my wife excitedly as I entered the house. "Two things: (1) What Friday tradition do we have? And (2) I've decided to enroll the children in a Jewish school in Chicago."

"What?!?" she shouted. "Are you nuts?"

"Believe me – as they say in English," I said, placing my hand on my heart: "Better the devil you know."

I imagined other parents sitting in front of the screen, trying to choose schools for their children, and making sure to keep a Twin Towers distance from schools with a high percentage of Arabs.

Asiatics and one more category: "two races at least."

Two races we are not, even though – contrary to my wife's opinion – I've decided that I am Ashkenazi. But that category would probably not be accepted in the United States, and the truth is that my children belong to the Asiatic group. If necessary, if there are problems, we will sue the school and the U.S. Department of Education and go all the way to federal court. We will have a feisty lawyer who, surprisingly, will resemble Ally McBeal. All the papers in the country will write about the class-action suit, and the story will also be covered on national TV. Finally, and despite all the difficulties, we will prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that Israel and Palestine are an integral part of Asia.

puter graphs and charts showing distribution by race, but I didn't find "Arabs." Oh God, my children are going to be Arabs, Muslims, in the United States. I don't know how many of my offspring even know they are Arabs in the first place, but all the Americans will know they are. And it won't help to start explaining that, yes, we really are Arabs, but we have Israeli citizenship. No one there will give two hoots about our passport. If our Israeli citizenship is meaningless over here, is it going to prove useful in the United States of America? Not a chance!

Fear gripped me when I considered my children's loneliness. I had thought that a trip like this, and being in multicolored, many-hued classes,

Illustration by Amos Biderman

