


times. And prominent Orthodox rabbis today have permitted conversions in cases where it was clear that the candidates would not live their lives in an Orthodox fashion. These authorities were simply applying the dictum of Rabbi Yosef Caro in his monumental *Beit Yosef* (*Yoreh De'ah* 268): Questions concerning a person's suitability for conversion must be left to the judgment of the rabbinical authority in charge of the case. Given this flexibility in the halakhah, it is not difficult to imagine that responsible rabbinical authorities could approve the conversions of individuals who, though they may not become Orthodox, nonetheless

complete a program of Jewish study and stand ready to defend Israel and to contribute to its vitality as a Jewish state.

A solution, in other words, lies in sight. Its success depends upon the willingness of the broad swath of the rabbinical community to pursue the conversation that Rabbis Gordis and Poupko advocate. They must pursue it even against the implacable opposition of ultra-Orthodox forces for whom the term "halakhic flexibility" is an anathema. If they do, they will have earned the thanks of *klal Yisrael*, the entire Jewish people, in Israel and everywhere else. 



Upcoming in Sh'ma

- Metaphor: Uses and Interpretations
- Polarization: Trends and Concerns
- Where Does History Begin?
- Healing, Hope, and Health
- Philanthropy & Tzedakah

What Jewish conversation would you like to have? Send suggestions for future *Sh'ma* topics to SBerrin@shma.com.

Assuming Identity

RUTH ABUSCH-MAGDER

Recently, I was walking across the Golden Gate Bridge with my family when I observed another family ambling toward us. The big-framed man was tall with dark skin and curly hair. The woman was short and roundish. Large gold earrings dangled beneath an updo that was topped off with carefully coiled curls. Both children had almond colored skin similar to that of the mother. Catching myself staring, I realized I was trying to figure out if they were Jewish.

When I lived in New York, I used to play a game in my head; I called it, "Lid/not a Lid." Walking in Penn Station or on the Upper West Side, I would assess the men coming toward me and guess whether they were wearing *kippot*. My ability to guess with amazing accuracy was based not only on deep familiarity with the dress and social habits of observant Jews but also on a deeply held set of assumption about Jews.

This summer, I began work as the rabbi-in-residence for Be'chol Lashon, an organization dedicated to celebrating the full diversity of Jewish peoplehood, with particular attention to racial and ethnic plurality. My first week coincided with Camp Be'chol Lashon and as I drove into the campsite that we shared with a local choir camp, I realized that my assumption about Jews had to change. It was easy to distinguish our children from the choir gang. The choir campers were all white, while the Jewish children were a showcase for the range of human skin tones.

For many complex historical and sociological reasons, most Americans equate Judaism with white skin — and most Jews tend to as-

sume that they know a Jew when they see one. Encountering African-American, Asian, Latino, or mixed-race Jews pushes white and light-skinned Jews to question what they see — their curiosity piqued about the Jewish journeys these folks have taken. But if we take the time to ask about those stories, if we question the Jewish authenticity of the Asian man with the *kippah* or the Spanish-speaking woman dropping her child off at the Jewish Community Center preschool, we need to be not only polite and respectful, but also open to the full messiness of Jewish identity and peoplehood, which will inevitably mean questioning ourselves.

There are no answers about what constitutes Jewish identity that do not in some way raise more questions.

There are as many different Jewish stories as there are racially and ethnically diverse Jews. Some are converts. Accepting converts into our clan is a tricky business: in part, because some Jews enjoy the cachet of being part of an exclusive club; in part, because accepting converts means accepting their rabbis (a different conversation — see the essays of Daniel Gordis, Yehiel Poupko, and Mark Washofsky on pages 12, 13, and 14 respectively); and, in part, because it requires an openness to the diversity of contributions to the collective Jewish whole. Before we judge whether Korean kimchi belongs on the seder plate or fried plantains are eaten at Hanukkah, we might remember that at one time *charain* (horseradish) and latkes were themselves an innovation.


The claim to membership in the Jewish people "because my parents and grandparents are

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Jews” also means that we accept Ethiopian Jews who can name seven generations of Jewish lineage. While the practices of some marginalized Jewish communities might differ from the ways most mainstream American Jews observe Judaism, who are we to decide whose comfort and familiarity are meant to be the standard? Would we, for example, get rid of “kosher for Passover” products that have rice and legumes in them because the millennia-old Sefardic customs unsettle Ashkenazic customs?

Our ability to embrace and rejoice in the full plurality of possibilities of Jewish peoplehood — and the individual Jews who make up that people — rests on our capacity to look beyond the certainty that we know what a Jew looks like. Jewish peoplehood is a beautifully complex and

multilayered business. There are no answers about what constitutes Jewish identity that do not in some way raise more questions. Our own history, sense of Judaism, and personal attachments shape and, unfortunately, also limit our understanding of peoplehood. If we focus our gaze with laser precision on the *kippah*-clad Jewish men of Manhattan, we obscure the complex realities that are our inheritance and also the birthright of our collective future.

Skin color is only one of the many ways individual Jews are, as my colleague Lacey Schwartz notes, “outside the box” of assumptions about what Jewish is. When we open ourselves up to embracing the many possibilities in modern Jewish identity, we will open new bridges toward the Jewish future. 

African and African Heritage Jews: Western Academic Perspectives

MARLA BRETTSCHEIDER

Since the first large-scale *aliyah* of Ethiopian Jews to Israel about 30 years ago, popular Jewish interest in African Jewish communities has blossomed. Western Jewish academic research on African and African heritage Jewish and Jewishly related communities is a rapidly growing area of study. The field offers tremendous possibilities for research into questions of Jewish identity. All too often, however, we find the academic lens reflecting the observer, rather than the phenomenon observed.

The Jewish African Diaspora is as large as its moniker implies, with communities crossing a wide range of life experience and geographic locales. In sub-Saharan Africa alone, Jewishly identified and related communities include the Abayudaya of Uganda, the Igbo in Nigeria, the Sefwi Wiawso in Ghana, the Lemba in Southern Africa, and the Beta Israel in Ethiopia. In the United States, communities of interest to scholars include various groups of Hebrew Israelites, the Commandment Keepers in New York City, the Beth Shalom B’nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation of Chicago, and Debra Bowen’s Temple Beth El of Philadelphia.

With such diversity, the range of questions academics could ask is broad: How has Jewish practice in a given community adopted aspects of local culture, and, likewise, how has the local culture been changed by the community’s

Jewish practices? How does local language impact liturgy? How has a community’s identity grown and shifted, given its geographical context in history, and what new insights does that offer for understanding other, more commonly studied, communities? What kinds of stories do communities tell about their Jewish heritage? And how are the stories and practices of these communities similar or not to those of other such communities, and why?

Yet, to date, asking and exploring the above questions does not reflect the trends in this growing academic field. Instead, Western academics tend to act as gatekeepers, primarily asking: Is “x” group (“truly”) Jewish? That this is usually the first question asked also impacts the arc of the broader research agenda that follows as well as methods employed.

Community members are asked to prove their Jewishness while explaining how they came to live in regions outside the areas that mainstream Jews generally associate with Jewish history. The stories of origin given by African and African heritage communities are expected to fit into existing narratives of Jewish exile, and to embody the tropes of Jewish history, migration patterns, and ritual observance common to that of larger, more established Jewish communities.

By framing our questions under the rubric of “being like us,” we are perpetuating a belief

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