

Envisioning Jewish Diversity

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COURTESY OF YAVILAH MCCOY

My great-grandmother, who is still alive, was the daughter of an enslaved African. My other great-grandmother, who took the name “Naomi,” was the first in my maternal family line to investigate the spiritual possibilities of Judaism and take steps toward Jewish practice.

Yavilah McCoy discussed Jewish diversity and her experience as a Jew of color **for Sh'ma in 2003:**

My parents converted to Orthodox Judaism, and raised me and my five siblings as Orthodox Jews. My Jewish education has included a range of perspectives: Hasidic elementary school and Yeshivah University Modern-Orthodox high school, The State University of New York at Albany, and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem...

...As I reflect on my experiences as a Jewish woman of color, I notice immediately that my consciousness of Jewish identity developed in two stages. Initially my education and community environment presented me with a picture of Judaism that was unidimensional in terms of geography, gender, religious status, race, and social class. But eventually I began to acknowledge the need for a more complex and complete picture of Judaism. I began to wrestle with the concept of “otherness” — “us” and “them” — in the Jewish community...

...What does Jewish look like? Is Jewish only a physical appearance with origins in Poland, Germany, and Russia? Or do you also look Jewish if you are from the Middle East and North Africa, India, Yemen, Ethiopia, Iraq, or Iran? By nature of our origins, we are the descendants of a brown-skinned Semitic tribe that migrated from the Middle East and North Africa. Yet, poignantly,

an African- American colleague recently asked me why, if Jews are so multicultural, he has only seen in books, in the media, in leadership, and everywhere else, white people?

My husband and I are Orthodox African- American Jews raising three beautiful Jews of color. I do the work of Jewish multiculturalism today, so that they will see the day when “Jewish” will mean a harmonious representation of the diversity of our world. In the blurred space between standard and strange lies a hospitable new reality for all Jews called “home.”

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