



tutional affiliations. While we want Jewish communal life to be “family friendly,” we must simultaneously work for it to not be family compulsory.

Many other family models and stresses need our attention as a Jewish community and raise questions about how Jewish families will address continuity, intermarriage, community education, child empowerment, gender parity, health insurance, job insecurity, relocation, violence, addiction, poverty, class climbing and class falling, and intergenerational support. How will our religious and secular institutions, our schools and our communities, support families

as they struggle and make choices, as they face new challenges as American Jewish families? Our families — in all of their wonderful, experimental, newly traditional, challenging, dysfunctional, joyful multiplicity — need understanding, support, and care. They require respectful questioning and some very smart answers that work for today.

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The Changing Face of Jewish Identity: Inside, Outside, and Other

Yavilah McCoy

As an African-American Jewish woman, I represent just one of many truly distinctive ethnicities that exist within Judaism. Over the course of my education, and the opportunities it afforded me for processing and reprocessing my experience, I have come to welcome my Black-Jewish heritage as a blessing, a source of pride, and a responsibility. 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. My mother’s parents, though they never formally converted, took on Jewish identity in the 1940s and 1950s at the height of racial segregation in this country. My grandfather, a civil rights spokesman and labor union leader, took every opportunity to emphasize the importance and significance of the African-American struggle for freedom, justice, and equality and helped me to take pride in the courage and vigilance that African-Americans exhibited in their historical and present-day struggle toward equality.

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. In my career as an English and Judaic Studies educator, I sought and found opportunities for teaching in Reform, Conservative, Modern Orthodox, and Hasidic day schools. As a young girl, my religious home life was inundated with the traditions of Sephardic Jewry as my mother and father settled and found their place in our Brooklyn Sephardic community.

In the various opportunities that God has afforded me, for seeing and appreciating the full diversity of Judaism, I have discovered a people that is beautiful, diverse, and rich in both history and wisdom. Yet, in my journeys I have also found myself struggling to make sense of the tension points where Jews of various distinctions fail to meet and appreciate each other around “difference.”

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.

Through my work in the field of “Jewish diversity” (and my founding of the Ayecha Resource Or-

ganization), I use the traditionally Jewish form of asking questions and facilitating introspection to explore the changing face and changing times of our community — specifically the evolution of “otherness” around color.

We can ask our rabbis to explore questions of welcome and integration in our synagogues: What should welcome look like in a synagogue? How will a Jew of color feel at home in the synagogue environment? Is it reasonable that each Jew of color serve as a model and teaching tool for the community? Must Jews of color serve as guides to sensitivity and awareness when they are coming to rabbis for their own spiritual guidance and wrestling themselves with issues of integration into their communities? Can teachers, rabbis, and lay leaders be role models and preempt the insensitivity before a Jew of color enters the door? How close are we to the day when Jews of color will walk with other Jews and feel free to just enjoy Judaism?

Different questions can be asked of day school leaders: Does your curriculum suggest an additive or an integrative approach to Jewish diversity? Is diversity relegated to special occasions, is it an exotic addition, or is it integrated into normative Judaism?

We can ask ourselves: Who have we constructed as the “other” in our own environments? How would our thinking be different if we put the “other” at the center of our reality? These and many other questions will help us rethink who is pres-

ently included and excluded by our definitions of community.

An introspective look at the messages that helped form our Jewish identities will question: 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.”

Yavilah McCoy is a professional diversity consultant and Director of the Ayecha Resource Organization (www.ayecha.org), which offers educational resources around difference for Jews of color and the wide Jewish community. She is married to Dr. Pinchas McCoy and resides in St. Louis, Mo., with their three children.

Kimchee on the Seder Plate

Angela Warnick Buchdahl

One year my mother put kimchee, a spicy, pickled cabbage condiment, on our seder plate. My Korean mother thought it was a reasonable substitution since both kimchee and horseradish elicit a similar sting in the mouth, the same clearing of the nostrils. She also liked kimchee on gefilte fish and matzo. “Kimchee just like maror, but better,” she said. I resigned myself to the fact that we were never going to be a “normal” Jewish family.

I grew up part of the “mixed multitude” of our people: an Ashkenazi, Reform Jewish father, a Ko-

rean Buddhist mother. I was born in Seoul and moved to Tacoma, Washington, at the age of five. Growing up, I knew my family was atypical, yet we were made to feel quite at home in our synagogue and community. My Jewish education began in my synagogue preschool, extended through cantorial and rabbinical school at Hebrew Union College (HUC), and continues today. I was the first Asian American to graduate from the rabbinical program at HUC, but definitely not the last — a Chinese American rabbi graduated the very next year, and I am sure others will follow.