

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.”

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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.



As a child, I believed that my sister and I were the “only ones” in the Jewish community — the only ones with Asian faces, the only ones whose family trees didn’t have roots in Eastern Europe, the only ones with kimchee on the seder plate. But as I grew older, I began to see myself reflected in the Jewish community. I was the only multiracial Jew at my Jewish summer camp in 1985; when I was a song-leader a decade later, there were a dozen. I have met hundreds of people in multiracial Jewish families in the Northeast through the Multiracial Jewish Network. Social scientist Gary Tobin numbers interracial Jewish families in the hundreds of thousands in North America.

As I learned more about Jewish history and culture, I found it very powerful to learn that being of mixed race in the Jewish community was not just a modern phenomenon. We were a mixed multitude when we left Egypt and entered Israel, and the Hebrews continued to acquire different cultures and races throughout our Diaspora history. Walking through the streets of modern-day Israel, one sees the multicolored faces of Ethiopian, Russian, Yemenite, Iraqi, Moroccan, Polish, and countless other races of Jews — many facial particularities, but all Jewish. Yet, if you were to ask the typical secular Israeli on the street what it meant to be Jewish, she might respond, “It’s not religious so much, it’s my culture, my ethnicity.” If Judaism is about culture, what then does it mean to be Jewish when Jews come from so many different cultures and ethnic backgrounds?

As the child of a non-Jewish mother, a mother who carried her own distinct ethnic and cultural traditions, I came to believe that I could never be “fully Jewish” since I could never be “purely” Jewish. I was reminded of this daily: when fielding the many comments like, “Funny, you don’t look Jewish,” or hav-

ing to answer questions on my halakhic status as a Jew. My internal questions of authenticity loomed over my Jewish identity throughout my adolescence into early adulthood, as I sought to integrate my Jewish, Korean, and secular American identities.

It was only in a period of crisis, one college summer while living in Israel, that I fully understood what my Jewish identity meant to me. After a painful summer of feeling marginalized and invisible in Israel, I called my mother to declare that I no longer wanted to be a Jew. I did not look Jewish, I did not carry a Jewish name, and I no longer wanted the heavy burden of having to explain and prove myself every time I entered a new Jewish community. She simply responded by saying, “Is that possible?” It was only at that moment that I realized I could no sooner stop being a Jew than I could stop being Korean, or female, or me. I decided then to have a *giyur*, what I termed a reaffirmation ceremony in which I dipped in the mikvah and reaffirmed my Jewish legacy. I have come to understand that anyone who has seriously considered her Jewish identity struggles with the many competing identities that the name “Jew” signifies.

What does it mean to be a “normal” Jewish family today? As we learn each others’ stories we hear the challenges and joys of reconciling our sometimes competing identities of being Jewish while also feminist, Arab, gay, African-American, or Korean. We were a mixed multitude in ancient times, and we still are. May we continue to see the many faces of Israel as a gift that enriches our people.

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Families Like Mine

Stacey Shuster

Like many other parents, I have had the unforgettable experience of sitting in the sanctuary of my synagogue at my son’s bar mitzvah feeling equal measures of disbelief, gratitude, and awe. That our family had made it to this moment; that my son had actually committed him-

self to this extraordinarily ambitious endeavor; that I could relax in the moment knowing that the millions of details were taken care of. But perhaps unlike many Jewish parents, I felt an additional sense of incredulity, because I never would have thought that my life would have ended up like this.