

Those Who Are Not Standing Here This Day

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Delivering his final oration to the Children of Israel before they cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land, the group seems diverse to Moses: men, women and children, leaders in powerful positions as well as working people, wood-choppers and water-drawers.

As he finalizes the covenant, though, Moses articulates awareness of missing pieces. Israel is not yet complete. Moses announces: “I make this covenant ... not with you alone, but with those who are standing here with us this day before the Eternal our God and with those who are not with us here this day.”ⁱ

To whom is Moses referring? Who are those absent people?

12th Century Torah commentator Ibn Ezra states the obvious: “Not with you alone, but rather, with you, and with those who shall come after you: your children, and your children’s children.”ⁱⁱ Transmitting our covenant to the next generation has always held central importance to our Jewish people.

Two hundred years later, another commentator, Gersonides, agrees with Ibn Ezra that Moses is referring to future generations, but he adds another important group: “... all [who had been] foreigners but would convert and take the covenant upon themselves.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Neither Moses, nor Ibn Ezra, nor even Gersonides could have predicted the diversity of the Jewish world in 2019. For one thing, they wouldn’t have imagined that many of us would have such light-colored skin.

The Israel Institute of Biblical Studies admits that “it is nearly impossible to know about the physical appearance of Abraham [and Sarah] or any of [their] Israelite descendants.” The best the Institute can do, based on the appearance of people in that region of the Middle East is to imagine that ancient Israelites “would have had dark wavy hair [and] an olive complexion.”^{iv}

Most American Jews—even people like me, whose only known ancestors were Jewish—must have mixed ancestry. Eran Ehlaik, a lecturer in population, medical and evolutionary genomics at University of Sheffield explains: “[R]ecent DNA analysis of Ashkenazic Jews”—that is, most Jews whose families lived in Europe across the broad sweep of the middles ages—“revealed that their maternal line is European. It has also been found that their DNA has only 3% ancient ancestry which links them with the Eastern Mediterranean...., the part of the world

Jewish people are said to have originally come from...So given that the genetic ancestry link is so low, Ashkenazic Jews' most recent ancestors must come from elsewhere.”^v

That analysis may be disheartening to some, who imagine that all of their ancestors living at the time stood at Mount Sinai and are lineal descendants of Abraham and Sarah. For me, though, the information is neither unexpected nor upsetting. Jews, like most other people in the world, are the result of population-mixing over time—which, from a Jewish point of view, we might call intermarriage and/or conversion.

Hitler referred to the Jewish people as a race. Jewish people have typically recoiled from such a designation. Moreover, in the words of Dr. Samuel Lebens, “A race, whatever that notion really means, is certainly not something that can be joined.”^{vi} People have joined the Jewish people through conversion, from the Bible to this day. Lebens is correct to argue, “The notion that we are a race is destructive. If the Jews are a race, then Zionism is racism.”^{vii}

Another way that we know we're not a race is that the Jewish people is racially diverse. Israeli Jews include light-skinned people of European stock like mine and many others whose skin is darker, typical of the Middle East. Some Israeli Jews are from India, and their appearance is hardly distinguishable from that of non-Jewish Indians. And of course, Ethiopian Jews, now a substantial minority in Israel, have very dark skin.

American Jews are of equally diverse origins. Ilana Kaufman, Director of the Jews of Color Field Building Initiative, and Dr. Ari Kelman, Professor of Education and Jewish Studies at Stanford University, write: “We estimate that of the United States' 7.2 million Jews, at least 12-15%, just over 1,000,000, are Jews of Color. One in seven. And that's part of an undercount! And we learned that in some communities at least 20% of Jewish households are multiracial.”^{viii}

Precisely that level of diversity is in evidence here at Temple on Sunday mornings—our future. The children of our Religious School include young people who 63 years ago could not have attended public school with their light-skinned classmates. Thanks to international adoption, conversion, and multiracial marriages, quite a few of the children in our Religious School are Jews of color.

Despite those large and growing numbers, people of color do not always feel welcome in Jewish life. Toby Manewith, writing in *The Forward*, tells of her friend Marra, Jewish since being adopted in infancy: “Last week, Mara went to synagogue in her adopted hometown for the first time. She was *not* greeted warmly. As she entered the synagogue, she was pointedly asked, ‘Are you invited

to be here?’ Worse, Manewith continues, “She has been assumed to be the nanny or beloved housekeeper at B’nai mitzvah services; she has been shown the kitchen or the room where the band is rehearsing. She is presumed to be an outsider in a place she has come for celebration or community or comfort.”^{ix}

Another article in *The Forward* just yesterday acknowledged a new concern for Jews of Color in this age of necessarily heightened synagogue security measures: “Jews of color are concerned that extra security will mean increased, and potentially hostile, scrutiny towards minority groups on their way to pray.”^x

The lesson for us must be: While Moses might not have been speaking before a diverse group, the Jewish people in our midst are diverse. We at Congregation B’nai Israel frequently celebrate that diversity. We do not merely tolerate, but celebrate, Jews-by-Choice alongside Jews by birth in our midst. We do not merely tolerate, but celebrate, the diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities in our midst. I believe, though I’m not certain, that we have done a good job of tolerating the presence of Jews of Color in our midst. However, the only way to assure that all are welcome is to celebrate that aspect of our diversity, too.

When people come to the Temple, let us assume that they’re Jewish, whatever their appearance, unless they volunteer that they’re not. Let us treat each person equally, Jewish or otherwise, for all of us are created in the image of God. Then, we may truly live up to the covenant, made in ancient days, under the leadership of a man who knew not what the future would bring, except that it would include a magnificent array of “those who are not standing here this day.”

Amen.

ⁱ Deuteronomy 29:13-14.

ⁱⁱ Ibn Ezra to Deuteronomy 29:14. Translation, *Sefaria*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ralbag, *Beur HMilot*, Deuteronomy 29:13. Translation mine.

^{iv} Jonathan Lipnick, “What Did Ancient Israelites Look Like?,” *Israel Institute of Biblical Studies blog*, March 18, 2015.

^v Eran Elhaik, “Ashkenazic Jews’ mysterious origins unraveled by scientists thanks to ancient DNA,” *The Conversation: Academic Rigor, Journalistic Flair*, September 5, 2018.

^{vi} Dr. Samuel Lebens, “Jews Are Not a Race, but a Nation,” *Ha-aretz*, June 14, 2012.

^{vii} *Ibid*.

^{viii} Ilana Kaufman and Ari Kelman, “Jews of Color and who counts in the Jewish community,” *The Times of Israel*, May 21, 2019.

^{ix} Toby Manewith, “Stop Alienating Jews Of Color In Synagogues,” *The Forward*, November 13, 2019.

^x Ari Feldman, “Holiday Checklist: Shofar, Apples, Honey, Gun. This is Synagogue, Post-Pittsburgh,” *The Forward*, September 26, 2019.