

When the Sages Fired the Gatekeeper

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Years ago, I was privileged to participate in the consecration of a United Methodist bishop and to hear his homily. He told a story from the Christian Scripture, which captivated my attention. Jesus observes his disciples, fishing in the Sea of Galilee but coming up empty. He counsels them to cast their nets on the opposite side of the boat. The result? They caught so many fish, they couldn't haul in their nets.ⁱ

The new Bishop was concerned that United Methodist clergy and parishioners had not pushed beyond their traditionally white, upper middle-class demographic in seeking to be inclusive. Focusing too heavily on life-long Methodists, the Church was like fishermen who continually cast their nets in the same place, constantly coming up empty. "Fish" might be more abundant, and more eager to come into the "net," on the other side of the boat.

North American Jews are belatedly becoming aware that over ten percent of our community is comprised of people of color.ⁱⁱ April Baskin, formerly Vice-President of Audacious Hospitality at our Union for Reform Judaism, writes, "Jews come in all colors, and our diaspora is beautiful and vast! North Africa and the Middle East are among the places from which Jews originated, and we have lived on every continent. We're a global, multiracial people that's growing more racially and ethnically diverse through interfaith and interracial marriage, conversion, and adoption."ⁱⁱⁱ

Despite this richness among our people, we too often fail to see our own diversity. We "fish," as it were, only in familiar places. Those of us who are white Jews often fail even to notice that the person of color in our midst may be Jewish. Baskin explains: "Jews of color often are greeted with long stares or concerned looks, confused for hired help, and constantly asked to explain why we are Jewish...If there are five Jewish people in a room, all of them white except for one person who's black, invariably, one of the white people will ask *only the black person*: 'So, how are you Jewish?'"^{iv}

The questioner doesn't intend to be racist or even rude. The sight of a Jewish person of color seems surprising. Still, the encounter is extremely hurtful. The time has long past when our American Jewish community is obligated to celebrate the broad diversity in our midst and to expect that members of our Jewish community will not all be the same kind of "fish," found on the "same side of the boat." When

a person joins us for worship or study, we should assume that they are one of us, unless they tell us otherwise, and we must not question their Jewish *bona fides*.

Moses seems to anticipate a diverse future for the Children of Israel, as he seals the Covenant with them. As we read this week, Moses addresses his people on the banks of the Jordan River, preparing to enter the Promised Land. He tells them that they are not sole proprietors of the sacred bond with God. Instead, says Moses, the Covenant is “not with you alone, but ... [also] with those who are not with us here this day.”^v

Our sages taught that “those who are not with us here this day” refers both to future generations, descendants of the people Moses addressed, and to people who, though not born into the covenant, would commit themselves to it through conversion.^{vi} I would suggest an additional approach to Moses’s words: People like me, both born to Jewish parents and white, may at least subconsciously imagine that only folks who looked like us stood with Moses on the banks of the Jordan River. Upon reflection, we may realize that skin color like mine may not occur naturally in the Middle East. Still, we are not likely to recognize the tremendous diversity of our own people fully until we *see* that with our own eyes.

The best place to observe the multi-hued present and future of our Jewish community is to visit our Religious School or Jacobs Camp. Sadly, I can’t invite you right now, despite the all-but-perfect attendance we have enjoyed since beginning our new year of learning via Zoom. Still, the faces on the screens on Sundays demonstrate the multiracial and multiethnic diversity that April Baskin describes. Better yet, that diversity is natural to our Religious School students. Upon seeing a non-white classmate, no white student asks, “So, how are *you* Jewish?” Instead, all of our kids see only friends and classmates, all part of the embracing Jewish community that they crave and which they’ve missed during this pandemic summer.

Since I became your rabbi, I have made a priority of bringing women, particularly female rabbis, as guest speakers. Of course, our congregants *know* that women can become Reform rabbis and are proud of that fact. Still, seeing and hearing a woman rabbi are important for a congregation that has been served only by men. The mental image of “rabbi” begins to shift, to become more inclusive.

For that same reason, I will now be looking to invite Jews of color to address us. The first is scheduled two weeks from tonight: Imani Romney-Rosa Chapman, an active member of Kolot Chayeinu, a Brooklyn synagogue, and the author of “*Un’taneh Tokef* for Black Lives,” recently published by *Lilith*. I look forward to introducing you soon to Evan Traylor, a first-year rabbinical student who grew up

at Congregation B’nai Israel in Oklahoma City and whose sermon about his Black and Jewish heritage touched my heart and those of our lay leaders at the Union for Reform Judaism Biennial Convention last December.

A story from the Talmud illustrates the benefit of expanding our community to include every single member of the Covenant. Rabban Gamliel had long headed the Rabbinical Academy. Throughout his tenure, students had to be screened before they were admitted to study. On the day that Gamliel was replaced, his successor, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria, “dismissed the guard at the door,” and all who were eager to study were invited to join. The Talmud says that 400 new benches—some say 700—had to be added to accommodate all the new students. The result of this new openness? An entire tractate, or volume, of the Talmud was composed in one day.^{vii} Inestimable creativity was the outcome of a rabbinic decision “to fish on the other side of the boat.”

As we approach the New Year, let us all resolve to expand our vision of our community. Let us rejoice that our Covenant is made not only with those whom we imagine to have stood with Moses but with all who were there, irrespective of the means or lineage or choice that brought us there. And then, let us benefit, like Talmudic sages before us, from boundless creativity.

ⁱ John 21:1-6.

ⁱⁱ Josefin Dolsten, “Jews of color are chronically undercounted, researchers find,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, May 30, 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ April Baskin, “How to Help Combat the ‘Perpetual Stranger Status’ of Jews of Color,” *urj.org*, February 1, 2016.

^{iv} *Ibid.* Emphasis Baskin’s.

^v Deuteronomy 29:13-14.

^{vi} B.T. *Shevuot* 39a.

^{vii} B.T. *Berachot* 28a.