

## JEWISH DIVERSITY BY RABBI RANDY FLEISHER

The Pharaoh finally had enough of the slave rebellion. “Up, depart from among my people!” he cried. So they did. And then Torah teaches that an *erev rav*, a **mixed multitude**, went up with them. Rashi explains these were people from many different nations, including Egyptians. It is easy to picture a ‘rainbow coalition;’ oppressed members of various cultures and races, united with the Hebrews and their faith in divine redemption. This mixed multitude (one commentator claims they numbered 240,000) were all present at Sinai; all of them became part of Israel.

We, the rabbis, board members and religious educators—all white Jews—were outside the ‘fishbowl.’ Comprising an inner circle were eight Jews of Color, sharing with one another—instructed to do so “as if nobody was watching”—how it felt to be both African-American and Jewish.

“Being Jewish is a shock to my Black friends.”

“It’s been wonderful to find my true spiritual self. I feel whole now. What is hard is that white Jews think we’re usurpers and ask questions like, “Are you Ethiopian?” People look at converts in general as being different from being really Jewish but I know my soul has been Jewish forever.”

“I walk into temple and many people assume I’m visiting—and it’s my temple! Some Jews I’ve met have the attitude that for Black Jews it’s just about religion, but for white Jews it’s a way of life. At the same time, I miss the songs of my African-American heritage. Do you have to lose one culture when you enter another?”

At this point, our facilitator, a third generation African-American Jew named Yavilah McCoy, broke into a stirring gospel melody of Adon Olam, a standard at her family’s *zemirot* during Shabbat. Each Jew inside the fishbowl looked as if they had experienced a major revelation.

Our interest and concern began with children. Rabbi Susan Talve of St. Louis’ Central Reform Congregation had observed through the years that many Jewish children of color felt vaguely out of place in synagogue and religious school. Then, when they felt pressured as young adults to make what we see as a false choice between their African-American identity and their Jewish one, they could see no reason to maintain Judaism as a system that might bring them comfort and meaning. At the same time, a significant number of African-American adults, some already practicing Jews-by-choice, others interested in the conversion process, became part of our synagogue family.

We are a liberal, city congregation heavily involved in the interfaith, multi-racial struggle for urban and racial justice. We think of ourselves as embracing and inclusive. Yet, we understand from experience that true inclusivity beyond lip

service involves hard work. When large numbers of gay and lesbian individuals and families became part of our community, we revisited and revised our curriculum, liturgy, board and teacher demographics and new member orientation. The result has been that a gay and lesbian *chavurah*, formed to help people feel more comfortable, outlived its usefulness and disbanded. Its members, while still representing a unique voice and culture, have become woven into the fabric of the congregation as a whole.

It was in that spirit that we took the first step of organizing an all-day Jewish Diversity Workshop (of which the fore-mentioned 'Fishbowl exercise was only a part). Yavilah, a native of Crown Heights, Orthodox Jew and an owner/founder of Diversity Unlimited, was a natural choice for a facilitator. We invited all of our families who had children of color, and all of our African-American adults (both Jews and non-Jewish spouses). However, it was the members of our board and our religious school staff who were the focus of the day. We wanted to learn together how to make our *kahillah* truly a holy place for Jews of Color.

And learn we did. Besides the need to look into musical diversity in our services, we learned that our kids need to believe that they're beautiful and it helps when they can interact with Jews of Color of all ages. That we must have role models-synagogue leaders and teachers-who are Black. That people should never sit alone in *shul*. That 'white skin privilege' is real, and we white Jews must be conscious of its insidious effects on our attitudes and behavior. That a local organization dedicated to bringing together Jews of Color from all the synagogues and denominations for Shabbat dinners and other programs would be very welcome. And we are committed to learning and doing more.

In one midrash, the Pharaoh at first did not want the *erev rav* to leave with the Hebrews. The former slaves, however, would not leave without them. Judaism is an idea; because it is held dear by people from so many different cultures, it transcends tribe. Each Jewish sub-culture, including Jews of Color, is a limb or organ, integral to the health of the body. How can we go anywhere without them?