

Shabbat Shalom. It is good to be home. I used to play here with family and friends when I was a little girl. I have such fond memories of learning how to speak to God and hearing about an amazing ark that Noah built. When I was 7 years old, my sister and I wore purple velvet dresses and walked down the aisle as flower girls in this sanctuary. We watched our mother marry our stepdad 2 years after our father passed away from pancreatic cancer. The setup was a little different at the time as this was the First Universalist Church. I remember how comfortable I felt coming here. This place reflected my family. My brothers, sister and I are all adopted and not biologically related. We have different ethnic backgrounds, races and abilities. I used to say the diversity of our skin tone reflected that of a rainbow.

By the time I was 12, we had stopped coming to church. We stopped attending Burroughs and went to Catholic Schools where we got more than our fair share of preaching, and then we moved to Edina. I was never able to accept Jesus as my savior and that he died for my sins. However, I firmly believed in God. For several years, I explored different religions trying to find a connection. Through family members who had converted after marrying into Jewish families, I had the opportunity to experience both the religious and cultural aspects of Judaism. I was participating so much that my cousin's father-in-law used to tell me I was a "Jew in the Closet" and it was time to come out.

Prior to converting, I spent time speaking with a Rabbi and other Jews about racial diversity and acceptance of people of color within the Jewish community. I was particularly sensitive to being accepted as I am a biracial woman who is light skinned. Growing up, I was often considered too dark for the white community and too light for the black community. It didn't help that my parents and majority of my family were white and I didn't "act" or "talk" black. Speaking ebonics was never going to fly in our family. My mother taught us that when you speak, people need to understand what you are saying.

While not perfect, I got the sense that I would be ok in the Jewish community. That once I converted I would be considered a member of the tribe. I made the decision that being Jewish is really who I am and I converted at Temple Israel. I spent my first Rosh Hashanah as a Jew at a Modern Orthodox Synagogue in Cork, Ireland. My Jewish friends were right. I was accepted as a member of the tribe and welcomed with open arms. And then I came back home.

I am amazed at how much we talk about Jewish identity and defining who is and who is not considered a Jew. If a mother is Jewish, then is the child automatically considered a Jew? What about if only the father is a Jew and the child is raised a Jew? Or, an individual who chooses to convert and who did the conversion? What about if someone looks or feels like a Jew? Depending on who you speak with, the answer will vary. It is the last question of "if someone looks or feels like a Jew" that hits home for me. I have yet to meet someone who hasn't assumed that I converted to Judaism. In fact, when I tell people that I am predominantly Irish and Western European, many people find that hard to believe because I don't look European. I don't have blond or light brown hair. I didn't inherit my biological mother's green eyes or her parent's blue eyes. I also don't have white skin. Because I do not look like the people in the vast number of pictures that depict Jewish people in Synagogues and Jewish spaces, I am often not considered a Jew even though I have

Ashkenazi Jewish DNA.

I am amazed at the amount of racism I have encountered within the Jewish community. The first time I was very uncomfortable in the sanctuary was when a Rabbi started to talk about the book "How Jews became White Folks". I remember sitting there listening how people went from checking the "Jewish" box on identification forms to the checking the "white" box. The discussion went on to how Jews assimilated into American culture, formed alliances to help black people during the civil rights movement but separated ways when new black leaders came onto the scene such as Louis Farrakhan. This was the first of three times that I had to sit through a drash about how Jews Became White Folks. When I brought this up, I received an apology and was told they would be certain to make it clear that this was specific to Ashkenazi Jews and not all Jews. As an Ashkenazi Jew of Color, I will never be able to just check the "white" box. If we want to discuss this book from a historical perspective, lets discuss how white Ashkenazi Jews gained a privilege of whiteness in a country that has a history of defining whiteness and what privilege came with being white. It was a privilege that gave access to income, housing, education and acceptance into the broader community that Jews of Color have struggled to obtain. This privilege also gave several white Jews an air of superiority over Jews of Color.

I remember having a conversation with some white Jews about the Civil Rights Movement and all that Jews did for black people. The words they used were "we helped them" and "we did this for them". When I questioned this, I was asked if I was diminishing what they had done for us? I said I am thankful for what several white Jews did for People of Color but I can only say "thank you" so many times. Am I obligated to be indebted to white Jews for the rest of my life? What about the Jews of Color who were fighting for rights at the same time? Where do they exist in our narrative of the role Jews played during the Civil Rights movement? I want to stand up and be proud of our history and the work Jews did during the Civil Rights movement. But I don't want to be continued to be viewed as "those people" the Jews helped. First and foremost, I am a Jew.

There are more subtle ways racism has shown up in our community. I remember walking towards the entrance at the JCC on my way to workout. A white Jew saw me and took more than 3 steps to the side to avoid walking right past me. I could see the uncomfortableness they felt having to walk past me. It broke my heart not because they felt uncomfortable but it was reminder that I still wasn't viewed as a member of the tribe. I am not alone in this experience. Many Jews of Color have experienced racism and had their Jewish identity called into question.

A friend of mine, who grew up Jewish, shared that their family was told by multiple Synagogues that their family was not welcomed to worship there. I can't imagine going to multiple Synagogues expressing my desire to become Jewish and have the door shut in my face, not for the three times I was supposed to ask according to the Book of Ruth, but because my skin color wasn't white.

I had the opportunity to be part of Bend the Arc's Selah Leadership Program. Cohort 14 was the first group comprised solely of Jews of Color. At our last group in person training class, we had a group photo taken of

22 beautiful Jews of Color who had been studying together. I showed that picture to a Rabbi who acknowledged the photo and then asked me if I was showing them the picture to prove there are Jews of Color. I proudly answered “yes”. Approximately 1 in 5 Jews are a Jew of Color. Some identify as Black, Asian, Latino or Mizrahi. We are not an anomaly but a fabric of our community.

Many of us have stayed in touch and expanded our network to include more Jews of Color around the United States. We held a conference call during the High Holy Days to see how people were feeling and what their experiences were on Rosh Hashanah. I was shocked by some of what I heard. While I spent time at Temple Israel greeting Temple members and saying “Shanah Tovah”, others were sometimes ignored or made to feel not welcome. To provide support on Yom Kippur, my Chavruta partner, kept their phone on in case anyone had issues attending services.

Shias Rishon, a writer, social activist and thought leader, is one of a "growing cadre of incredibly talented Jewish leaders of Color" whose work takes prejudice, bias, and ignorance head on, relentless in the pursuit of truth by partnering with his audience to ask the questions about humanity, race, religion, and social injustice that we all have...and maybe are afraid to talk about. His humorous and often irreverent voice shatters the paradigms and misconceptions of Orthodox Judaism, American Jewish racial identity, and African-American religious identity, with presentations that deftly take the listener from ridiculous pop-culture reflections to gut-punch insights on race, religion, and the failings of both in America. www.manishtana.net

His performance on Eli Talks about “What Makes this Jew different than all other Jews? Race, difference and safety in Jewish Spaces”, aptly describes some of the challenges Jews of Color face, whether shopping for a Seder plate and someone coming to explain what a Seder plate was to ensure they knew they were actually purchasing a Seder plate, told we don’t understand the impact of the Holocaust, asked if we are playing around being Jewish or getting the door closed on you for an event you planned because you can’t possibly be a Jew.

As we study the Torah this week, we are slaves in Egypt. Moses and Aaron are working with God to help bring us to freedom. We know we made it out of Egypt but not all of us made it out of slavery. Jews of Color are still in a form of slavery that several white Jews have denied exists and continue to perpetuate within our community. Many of us have engaged in Courageous Conversations learning and taking about the Power of Oppressive Narratives, Colorism in the Jewish Community, the Othering effect and White Fragility in Synagogues. We have reached a point where we need to move beyond conversations. It is time to act. Jews of Color need white Jews to be their Standing Stone and confront and stop those in our community who demean, ignore, question and unwelcome Jews of Color. This isn’t an easy task. Acting can be uncomfortable and frightening. You don’t know how someone will respond when you tell them their words and/or actions are not ok. That uncomfortableness is even worse for the victim who endures the treatment.

If you are willing to be a Standing Stone for Jews of Color and take a bold step towards confronting and stopping racism within our community, ensuring all Jews are out of slavery, I invite you to stand and join

Rabbi Rosenberg and myself as we sing Melanie DeMore's Standing Stone. The lyrics to the song are in your program. Shabbat Shalom