

A View from the Mountain

(looking left) Shanah tovah! (looking right) Oh, sorry. Shanah Tovah! Wait a second. I'm confused. Someone help me out, I don't really know who I am speaking to or where they are. What's the right camera?

Oh, there are a whole bunch of actual people right here in front of me. Hello! I can see you! You look fantastic! It looks like you found your dress clothes from the back of the closet and combed your hair and everything. And of course, there are so many more of you, who are at home watching. I wish I could see you all. I imagine that while in a way, it might be nice to be watching with your feet up, it's also a little harder to feel a part of what's happening. There is something important about being seen. This isn't a one-way communication. It's a conversation in which everyone has a role.

Moses begins the speech that's recorded in the Yom Kippur Torah reading, "Atem netzavim hayom, kulchem, You are standing here this day, all of you." Tradition tells us there are millions of people standing at the mountain. Having just had the experience of leading so many services with people watching from afar, I feel like I know more, now, what he is going through.

Believe it or not, Moses even welcomes those attending virtually! I'm serious. He acknowledges, "Those who are standing here with us today before Adonai our God, and those who are not here this day." It sounds a lot like the way his descendants would welcome the global congregation of Jews thousands of years later, and, in fact, I think he means us, the generations to come, just as our tradition teaches that every Jew of every generation was present at Sinai.

Moses can't see everyone who is listening. But I have always been struck by his effort to try, to leave no one unnoticed. He points out groups of people sometimes forgotten along with the other, more traditionally recognized categories: men and women, young and old, the leaders and the ones who hue the wood and draw the water. Every person must know they are seen. At the same time, I feel he is trying to help the Israelites see each other, to understand who they are as a group now, after 400 years in Egypt. They are not a tribe anymore. They are a society. They have changed, and before they move into the Land of Israel, they need to understand this, so they can move forward as a community, every member counted.

Perhaps every few generations, we need a such moment of re-examination, to look again at who our community is and bring those who may feel invisible into focus. I remember this when I was a kid. It was a time when the growing rate of interfaith marriage had changed the makeup of the Jewish community. There were now many children who had one Jewish parent. If that was their mother, they were considered Jewish. If it was their father, they were not. This traditional way of setting the boundary suddenly seemed arbitrary. I could see the hurt in my friends' faces, and then sometimes, the look of distance, the beginning of the end of their Jewish identity. Eventually, the question, "Who is a Jew," was brought up more and more, at *oneg shabbats* and public debates. Thousands of individuals who felt part of the Jewish people were being told they did not belong.

The Reform Movement responded by accepting patrilineal descent. You can be a Jew if either one of your parents is Jewish. Since then, we've seen what this refocusing has done for us, ensuring that thousands of families are included in our view of who we are. We've also grown to understand how important it is that non-Jewish parents or other family members of Jews are affirmed as essential members of the Jewish community. At TRS, somewhere around a fifth of our adult members are not Jewish. And yet, those of you sitting here or watching, who are in this group, know: you attend Torah study, teach classes, run projects at our Mitzvah days, stand out there with your reflective jackets on at carpool on Sundays, take other leadership roles and make sure your children get the most out of B'nai Mitzvah, or that candles are lit every Friday night. You are part of the Jewish family and the Jewish people.

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The Jewish people is always changing, and Judaism's ability to remain strong and relevant has depended on staying in touch with the nuances of who – and even what – we are. In the 17- and 1800's, when Jews gained full rights as citizens of Europe and started to integrate into society, we began to wrestle with the question of whether we are a nation or a religious group. We are not just a religious group – theology and synagogue attendance do not define us. We aren't exactly a nationality — a lot of us may think of Israel as a homeland, but most of us are citizens of other countries. In the 1970's, when multiculturalism exploded in America, I remember being one of the many Jews who began to think of ourselves as an ethnic group, but the Jewish people is really too culturally diverse to define ourselves that way. We are sort of every one of these things, and none of them completely. The term, “people” is flexible and unifying. We are a people made up of millions of unique people, all finding our own point of connection.

One thing we are not, and have never been, is a racial group. In fact, if Moses were looking at us from the mountain today, naming who we are and pointing us out to each other, I believe this is the first thing he would see: we are now highly racially diverse. First, 43 percent of the world's Jews live in Israel¹, and most of them are of Middle Eastern, African or Asian descent. Most of the rest live in America. According to Pew, 92 percent of us identify as White, leaving eight percent who are Asian, Hispanic, Black or another ethnicity. Eight percent is a lot. But it also doesn't capture how the population is changing. Among American Jewish young adults 18-29, fifteen percent are non-White or multiracial. Fifteen percent! If that many young Jews today are people of color, think of how many other families in the Jewish community include people of color, who are not Jewish themselves, but are part of our community. And, think of how these numbers will increase, even one generation from now. Our demographics as a people are following those of the whole country, which will be majority non-White in 2045, by the US Census estimate.

If we can successfully embrace these changes, we will continue to grow into a stronger, healthier community that fully includes all its members. That's what Moses called on us to do at the mountain, and on *Yom Kippur*, we must ask ourselves whether we are living up to that vision. We all want to be able to say, Yes. However, we have some work to do.

At a recent event, I attended a workshop led by a Black Jewish woman to discuss this very issue. As we waited for her to begin talking, our session leader contemplated the paper program sitting in front of her. She was upset, and she decided we needed to know why. The program identified her as the daughter of a Jewish mother and an African American father. She explained that her father was Jewish. He had converted a long time ago. Here she was, representing Black Jews so often overlooked by the Jewish community, and the Jewish identity of her own father had been erased. She shared with us that this sort of thing had happened to her dad enough times that at this point, he had stopped participating in Jewish community. He felt he would never be seen as Jewish.

I heard the experience of Tova, a high school student with dark skin who began an internship with a Jewish organization. She met the other staff, and one woman was excited to hear that Tova went to the same high school as her son. The next day, this mother reported to Tova that her son had been surprised. “Like, what, no way, dude, Tova's Jewish?” Tova was supposed to be amused, but when she and her mentor got back to their office, she closed the door and burst into tears. “My name is Tova. I wear a Jewish star around my neck. I go to synagogue. My mother is Jewish. What more do I need to do to be seen, and to be counted, and to matter to these people? And someone needs to tell that dude not all Jews are White.”²

¹ Including the West Bank

² Ilana Kaufman's [ELI Talk](#), “Racism in the Jewish Community: the Uncomfortable Truth”

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A woman in our congregation became Jewish years ago. Her husband would have agreed to raise their children as Christians. She had a positive Christian upbringing. She has always felt a connection with the divine. She did not choose Judaism by default, or because she was dissatisfied with her faith of origin. She chose it because she loved its music and prayers. She was compelled by its history and its legacy. She wanted to ensure that Judaism continued in her family and her children because most of her husband's family had essentially been lost in the Holocaust.

She remains a devoted and active member, but it hasn't always been easy. She shared with me that even now, she frequently has to steel herself to overcome comments that tell her this is not her space: people assuming that because she's Asian, she is not Jewish, repeatedly asking her where she's from, mistaking her for a visitor in a congregation she has been a part of for 20 years.

These are not deliberate acts, and while I have spoken with people in our congregation who have received more extreme remarks, for the most part, each one might seem small. What we are hearing, from the hundreds of thousands of Jews of Color in America, is that all these little comments add up. After a while, you don't want to come anymore. In a recent study³, half of the self-identified Jews of Color surveyed said that because of these kinds of experiences, they do not feel they belong. That's the reason this group is underrepresented in congregations.

We want to change this. What do we do? First, we can try to be conscious of the difference between welcoming and belonging. Everyone here must be allowed to feel that this is their space, and that they don't need to be welcomed like a guest. Remembering the stories I've just told and trying to keep in mind an awareness of who our community is in the 21st century might help us avoid treating someone like a visitor who really is part of our family. If we remember how diverse our community is, and that anyone we meet at TRS is likely to be Jewish, we will be more ready to approach everyone we encounter with the assumption that they belong.

Another thing we can do is sit down with other members in a fascinating, one-session, small group conversation that explores our own assumptions and biases and provides insight into the lives of People of Color. This program is developed and run by our own lay leaders and is called the Dialogue on Race and Equity. It's a non-threatening way to become aware of how we see the world around us and begin to widen our view. I invite every one of us to have this experience.

A generation ago, the continuity of the American Jewish community was the topic of the day. As the third generation of Jews was born and raised here and continued to assimilate, many said, people would stop engaging with our tradition.

Years after these predictions, we are still here. Just during the pandemic, I officiated at ten conversions! Judaism is compelling in the modern age, and people are choosing to participate. Whether they were born Jewish or not, they feel that Jewish values are their values, that Jewish community, prayer, justice, *tikkun olam* or repairing the world, Torah, or all of this, give them a sense of purpose. They feel a connection to a deep and insightful tradition that allows questioning.

Not only are Jews of Color interested in Jewish community, but they are becoming lay leaders, rabbis and cantors, and have started organizations dedicated to helping people like them find their home in Judaism. All of this is essential to the development of a healthy, vibrant Jewish people in future generations. These Jews are waiting for us to recognize them, see them, and respond to them as Jews.

³ Jews of Color Initiative, August 2021

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While the challenges facing Jews of Color in finding belonging in our community are unique and cannot be generalized with the experiences of other groups, it also must be pointed out that there is more that Moses would teach us today. There are others in our community who may not always feel they belong: including children and adults with disabilities, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and gender non-binary people, and others who might not fit the assumptions we make about who our congregation is. Every one of us needs to be seen as fully part of our family and allowed to be here without question as to who they are or why they came. We need and want them to be here. Through our newly formed Diversity, Equity and Inclusion task force, we are determined to continue to hold ourselves accountable to all of these groups and more.

A few minutes ago, when I began speaking to you, I had trouble deciding which way to face. This is a confusion we cannot afford at this moment in our history. Moses' next words to the people, after, "You are standing here, today, all of you," are, "*Lifnei Adonai Eloheichem*, Before Adonai your God, or, *lifnei*, facing, Adonai your God. *Yom Kippur* is a time when we turn to face God. We are held accountable for our past and our future. Whatever accountability, whatever challenges each of us faces, we need each other. Whatever future trials we face, as a people, a nation and a world, we have to be able to turn and face them together. We must be one family, seeking to know each other, embrace each other, and stand with each other. We are one community, and we must strive to help every member feel they are seen, they are noticed, and they belong.