

Shabbat Shalom. As you have heard, I stand before you tonight as a member of this congregation and as a staff member, but in particular, to share my experiences as a Hispanic-Filipino woman in this community. I recently participated in the Union for Reform Judaism's JewV'Nation Fellowship, in the aptly named "Jews of Color" cohort. When I was first encouraged to apply, I was skeptical. My experiences in the Jewish community up until that point made me hesitant to partake in a program that was geared towards Jews "of Color" but administered by an organization whose senior leadership is mostly devoid of color.

Honestly, the only reason I ended up applying was because I would be working with April Baskin, who was then the URJ's Vice President of Audacious Hospitality and is a well-known, biracial advocate for Jews of Color.

I am a Hispanic-Filipino woman in a predominantly white Jewish community. For better or worse, I stand out. Growing up in a diverse environment like Oak Cliff meant that I never really had to address the color of my skin or what that means because there were so many people who looked like me.

Before attending my first Shabbat service here, my mom pulled me aside and asked me point blank,

"You do know you're going to be surrounded by white people, right? You have to act differently."

I laughed her off, not understanding just how naïve and idealistic I really was. But that changed when I became more involved in the Jewish community and was confronted with racism and my skin color in startling and devastating ways.

I first came to Temple in 2011 and completed my conversion in 2013. I've worked in the Jewish community now for over six years and have taught fourth grade Judaica here since 2014. I've been on Jewish leadership trips to Israel, Cuba, and Europe, sit on the ADL regional board, and even joke that I should just put a bed in the archives or library since I'm here six days a week. I love being here and Temple is truly my second home.

Still, I've found it hard to really feel like a part of the community. I've talked to many people about this, from trusted rabbis to close friends, but nothing they said or suggested ever felt right, though I know they genuinely wanted to help.

I even told someone that if I ever left my job at Temple, I most likely wouldn't maintain membership because there would no longer be a reason for me to come up to north Dallas.

I have encountered far too many micro-aggressions and subtle jabs that have left me wondering if I was going crazy. Each incident has burned into my memory.

Like, the time a former coworker laughed and said, "What, you think there are other Jews who look like you?"

Or the time I was subbing for the religious school and was reading a book to a kindergarten class when a student interrupted to ask if I was covered in mud.

Then there was that time when a former supervisor asked if the new receptionist spoke "good English" after it was revealed that she was Hispanic. When I called him out on his racist comment, another coworker said, "Well, we *are* in Texas."

Or that time when someone assumed that I emigrated here from Mexico. I'm a second-generation American on my mother's side.

So, yes, I was skeptical about this national fellowship for Jews of Color. When I learned that I had been accepted, my cynical side was thrilled for my resume. But even though I've been following April Baskin's work closely for the last several years, I wasn't expecting much.

But I was wrong.

I didn't know just how much I needed to spend time with Jews of Color, people who share my experiences and who look like me.

Like the Korean-American rabbinical student, we'll call her Lydia, who talked about the casual racism she has encountered from both her peers and professors.

Or Bryant, an African-American Jewish youth professional who often feels like he has to act "white" in order to be taken seriously.

Then there's Amanda, a fellow Hispanic Jew-by-Choice, who also struggles to maintain two seemingly separate identities and how to embrace her Judaism without losing her Hispanic heritage in the process.

I didn't know I needed someone to vocally acknowledge that I belong in the Jewish community and my heritage only enriches the fabric of the community.

I didn't know that in order to start healing the cracks in my faith, I needed to be surrounded by these peers while learning how to take my rightful place at the table.

I didn't realize just how much stress had built up inside me, how afraid I was to say anything because I never felt safe or secure enough at Temple to voice these concerns. That was a troubling revelation.

This congregation has a rich history of social justice advocacy. When I learned about Rabbi Olan fighting for racial equality in the 1950s, working with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at an anti-poll tax rally, and how he championed for the membership of N. Anthony Jones, Temple's first African-American member, despite hesitation from the Board of Trustees, I was in awe. When I learned the extent of Temple's involvement with the Vickery Meadows community, I felt proud to be a member. Outside these walls, we are fighting the good fight. But what happens if we look inward?

It's difficult to admit that we are failing some members of this community, but we need to acknowledge that before we can begin to work towards becoming a stronger, more inclusive congregation. It's hard to reconcile the love and respect I have for this community with the racism I've witnessed and experienced. Rabbi Olan's radically progressive views and this congregation's consistent social justice activism ring hollow when someone questions my education or what exactly qualifies me to oversee the libraries and archives, or insinuates that I was only promoted because I am a "diverse" face.

There is another reason that compelled me to speak tonight. In each religious school class I've taught, there have been students with nonwhite ethnic backgrounds. I don't want them to feel like their racial identity is a hindrance to their Jewish identity or feel like they have to choose one over the other, so I am doing this for them.

I don't have kids yet but I understand how important it is to see yourself reflected in the curriculum and the community. That doesn't always happen. During my first year of teaching, I endured nonstop questions about my conversion, my heritage, and my identity, and I was less than impressed with the lack of diversity included in the curriculum. Despite that, I came back.

During my second year, I taught the class about Operation Solomon, an Israeli military operation that resulted in over 14,000 Ethiopian Jews being airlifted to Israel in the course of one day in 1991. As I was explaining the significance of the mission, one of the students interrupted.

“Why should we care about them?”

I was startled, but I thought carefully before I replied.

“We care about them because they are Jews. Jews are responsible for each other and we’re a global family, even if we look different.”

We are failing our children and ourselves when we neglect to show the full diversity of the Diaspora so I’ve worked hard to integrate the whole spectrum of global Jewry into my lessons. My class learns about ancient Jewish communities in China and India, comparing their traditions with what they do. I also teach about Dia de los Muertos, Day of the Dead, and how it is celebrated in Mexico before asking how it is similar to yizkor. The pictures in my classroom show the different faces of Judaism: Hispanic, white, Asian, Arab, Ashkenazi, Sephardic, Mizrahi, and more.

If I may be completely honest for a moment, when Rabbi Stern asked me to speak I was honored, but now, as I stand here before you, I’m completely terrified. I started working here in the religious school, but I am now in a public-facing leadership role and I am conscious of the fact that I am one of a handful of Jews of Color in such positions across the country. Because of this, I know that I may be perceived as representing all Jews of Color, which is a daunting responsibility when I have a hard enough time trying to navigate my own Jewish identity. It may not seem like it to you, but I am taking an incredibly risky leap of faith tonight.

Each and every day I feel immense pressure to be the model minority and I have to choose my battles carefully. Sometimes this means staying silent when a racist comment is made because I don’t feel like I have the luxury of speaking out without consequences. Being the model minority also requires me to quickly evaluate who I am interacting with and decide which version of myself will be acceptable at that time. Code-switching like this is exhausting and for a long time, I thought I needed to remain quiet about racism in the Jewish community. It’s certainly much easier to stay silent, but the JewV’Nation fellowship made me realize that I have a responsibility to speak out, not only for my sake, but for my

fellow Jews of Color who may not want to take such a risk for fear of retaliation. In a way, I am also trying to pave the road for those who will follow me.

Last month I had the honor of being a mikvah witness at the conversion ceremony for one of my fourth grade students. Like me, he is Hispanic and watching his Jewish identity grow has been a privilege. His classmates don't treat him any differently and as far as I can tell, it doesn't seem like he is struggling with his dual identities. When I taught Dia de los Muertos this year, he even helped me with some of the Spanish. I don't ever want him to question his place in the community.

I consider this community my chosen family and I know we can do better. As an only child of a single mom, this place and all of you mean the world to me, because despite my negative experiences and crises of faith, I have never once regretted converting. I came to Temple at a really low point in my life. I had just moved back home after finishing grad school and I was struggling to find my footing in the world. At one point, I began having suicidal thoughts because I didn't think the world had space for me. Yet somehow I managed to find my way to Temple and things began to slowly fall into place. My world has grown bigger and brighter and more noisy and joyful. I probably spend more time here than at home, but that doesn't matter because I am the most peaceful when I'm here. After all these years, it still leaves me in awe that a simple Google search and a quick email was the beginning of such an important life journey.

That is why I am asking you to look inward and identify your conscious and unconscious biases about what Jews look like and then imagine a more inclusive Temple that embraces its Jews of Color without question.

Imagine a Temple Emanu-El where we don't assume that if someone isn't white they must work for one of our vendors.

Imagine a Temple Emanu-El where an African –American Jewish child feels comfortable speaking about what it means to belong to multiple minority communities, where an Asian American teenager can talk about her love for K-Pop, where our fifth graders on Sunday morning skype with their religious school counterparts at the synagogue in Mexico City, where we honor and explore the ethnic differences that enrich our Jewish community.

In this week's Torah portion, the Israelites gather at the foot of Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. But our tradition teaches that it wasn't just they

who gathered – the rabbis teach that all of us were there, Jews of every generation before or since. That means that you were there. And I was there. And Lydia and Bryant and Amanda were there. It means that Jews of every land and age and color and shade and language and ethnicity were there.

When you imagine Sinai, what do you see?

When you imagine Temple, what do you see?

I hope that together we can see a Temple Emanu-El of inclusion and diversity and dignity, the congregation we have always strived to be.

This congregation has done amazing things in the pursuit of social justice and tikkun olam, so there is no doubt that this vision can become real. As our sages taught, we are not expected to finish the work of repairing the world, but we are not free to turn away from it. Shabbat Shalom.