

Hello, my name is Yael Silverberg-Urian and I am the Vice President of Tikkun Olam at Bnai Keshet. I was asked to do a Dvarlette related to our theme "Welcoming the Stranger" and have chosen to focus on the "Strangers within our Jewish Community." Today I will speak about Jews on the Periphery looking at some of the experiences of Jews of Color. At the end of my talk, I hope you will indulge me as I make 1 quick plug for work that is going on that I hope some or many of you will be interested in helping out with.

So, take a moment and look around our sanctuary. Who do you see? One striking feature that I see is that our sanctuary is predominantly filled with White Jews, their partners, children, friends, and extended family. I, myself, am a White, Ashkenazi Jew. My wife and daughter are both Filipinas. Having a daughter who is a Jew of Color has opened my eyes to issues of "belonging" in the Jewish Community that had not been on my radar as significantly before. Today, I want to bring you with me into the world of Global Jewish Diversity and the work American Jews need to do to move from having the term "Ashkenazi or White, European Jew" as the definition of our normative, authentic Jewish identity.

If I was to chose a list of terms that define how I see myself, it would include: Jewish, Progressive, Feminist, Lesbian, and Anti-Racist. I have to say, honestly, that if someone had asked me years ago how racism and Judaism intersected, I would have drawn a blank and responded confidently that "we are the group that stands with People of Color demanding justice" or "We Jews have been oppressed with Anti-Semitism and are as

much the "Other" as any group of Color." It would have been difficult for me to see the connection or my placement onto the side of Oppressor or Power Holder. Having White skin privilege was a concept that I had never thought about with respect to being a Jew; my people have such a long history of discrimination! I began my work uncovering the truths about being a White Jew when I started listening and baring witness to the experiences of Jews of Color and seeing many bridges to the racism that other People of Color often speak. Soon, I began to understand what it meant that I am located within simultaneous positions of skin privilege and oppression. Maya Angeleou calls this awakening - the movement from the "unknowing majority" to consciousness. It is that awakening for which I am here to advocate.

If some of you are sitting being frustrated by my request to take a look at how we are aiding in maintaining a White-centric Judaism: I ask you to listen to the following few examples from a Privileges checklist created by the members of the Jewish Multicultural Network. The privileges listed below are ones that most White Jews take for granted today, but which are not available to most Jews of Color in the United States. While the checklist offers 2 pages of ways Jews of Color do not "fit in", I have chosen just a sampling:

___ I can walk into my temple and feel that others do not see me or my children as outsiders.

___ I can easily find Jewish books and toys for my children with images of Jews that look like them.

___ I can enjoy music at my temple that reflects the tunes, prayers, and cultural roots of my specific Jewish heritage.

___ My child's authenticity as a Jew is never questioned by adults or children based on his/her skin color.

___ People never say to me, “But you don’t look Jewish,” either seriously or as though it was funny.

___ I can arrange to be in the company of Jews of my heritage most of the time.

___ I can enroll in a Jewish day school, yeshiva, and historically Jewish college and find Jewish students and professors with my racial or ethnic background.

___ I am never asked “how” I am Jewish at social or dating events.

___ People of color do not question why I am Jewish.

Research from 2001 revealed that 20% of America’s 6 million Jews or approximately 1,200,000 are racially and ethnically diverse, including African American, Asian, Latino, Sephardic (Spanish/ Portuguese descent), Mizrahi (North African/ Middle Eastern descent) and mixed race. (Survey of Racially & Ethnically Diverse Jews in the United States, Institute for Jewish & community Research, 2001). With over 1/5th of Jews in 2001 being Ethnically Diverse, why is it that Jewish texts, websites, camps, schools, media, etc, feature illustrations, information and curricula that focused almost solely on Whites or Ashkenazis ? Why is Jewish music, newspapers, and foods almost always discussed in European Jewish terms? According to the Pew Research Center, In 2009, 70% of American Jews 30 years and over considered themselves White while only 60% of those between 18-29 years did. (Dec., 2009 Current Population Survey, Pew Research Center) With this new face of American Jewry, will our focus on European, White Jewry lead to losing a significant portion of our youth as many of those to whom we have been unwilling to share a significant voice find places where they are accepted? What does it say about us as a People who are taught to Welcome the Stranger, yet we are only willing to do so if they fit our narrow definitions? Will American Jewry continue to miss out on the richness that the full community can offer?

A quick review of history and a look at Global Jewry:

The Jewish experience is built upon foundations of diversity as old as the Jewish people, a reality that may be lost to many Jews who tend to think of other Jews as being only like themselves. The historical home of the Jews lies at the geographic crossroads of Africa, Asia, and Europe. Jews are a mixture of many peoples and Jewish origins include a multitude of languages, nations, tribes, and skin colors.

Remember, the Jewish people left Egypt and sojourned for 400 years. The Exodus was about an escape from slavery to freedom, but was also a geographic journey that took the Hebrew people across the Sinai from Asia to Africa and back again. Throughout the centuries, the Hebrews had long and deep connections with Mediterranean, European, Asian and African cultures. (Bechol Leshon website)

Even at our beginning, Jews were a blend of different groups. The story of the Jewish people is filled with interracial and intercultural mixing. After all, Israel's greatest prophet, Moses, married Zipporah, an Ethiopian. Solomon and David each took wives from Africa. Joseph married an Egyptian - an African. While so much of contemporary Jewish consciousness comes from Eastern and Central Europe, Jews have deep roots in Africa, and later in the Iberian Peninsula.

From their original homes in Asia and Africa, Jews spread across the globe.

Importantly, let us not forget that though many Jews may look different from their fellow Jews of European origin, they pray to the same God and consider themselves part of the same people. Jews are diverse, yet we are tied to each other historically and

religiously.

With the High Holidays, we begin our new year. As we start anew, we have an opportunity to engage in communal reflection and retrospection. Too often differences in observance, family background, national origin, and ethnic and or racial identity have divided the Jewish people. Let us imagine a new global Judaism that transcends differences in geography, ethnicity, class, race, ritual practice, and beliefs. In that world, discussions about “who-is-a-real-Jew” are replaced with celebration of the rich, multi-dimensional character of the Jewish people. Jewish history is built on this reality. We must utilize this time to honor the things that differentiate us and celebrate that which is similar. All those things contribute to our diverse Jewish family and connect each and every one of us as part of klal yisrael.

So where do we begin? With a willingness to look deeply at our "givens" and work to change our opinions about the things that separate us from one another. We each must ask how we contribute to maintaining the insider/outsider dichotomy. We each must begin the hard process of undoing a structure that has all too often made Jews of Color look for shuls, camps, school, worlds that are separate in an attempt to know that they will be accepted for all of who they are. It is time to challenge ourselves here at Bnai Keshet and in the larger American Jewish Community. We must seek to overcome the significant organizational, cultural and ideological barriers to growth in the Jewish community. We must commit ourselves to grow and strengthen the Jewish people through ethnic, cultural, and racial inclusiveness by advocating for the diversity that has

characterized the Jewish people throughout history. In this way, we will foster an expanding Jewish community that embraces its differences.

We at Bnai Keshet can be in the forefront of becoming a truly inclusive place for all Jews. In the coming months I will be putting a notice on the website and into the Bnai Keshet Blast. Anyone interested in forging this new path with me, I look forward to what we can discuss, UN-learn and create together.

FOR MY QUICK ANNOUNCEMENT about another group on the periphery that needs our help:

*64% of New Jerseyans approve of same sex marriage. That's the highest state percentage in the country.

*A marriage equality bill was passed by both the Senate and the Assembly in 2012 but... Gov. Christie Vetoed it preventing Loving and Committed Couples from marrying in NJ. We have until Dec. 31st to find the votes to override the Veto.

*That's why New Jersey United for Marriage is holding phone banks every Monday and Thursday from 6-9:30 p.m. at 40 S Fullerton Ave in Montclair at First Congregational Church.

We have a Congregational Team helping make phone calls and we need your help. SO...if you are able to join us once a week, every other week, once a month...we need you for this 3 month push towards Marriage Equality. I have flyers outside the sanctuary and in the synagogue office.

May we work together for a world that is more inclusive,

L'Shana Tova