

Imagine, on this Yom Kippur day...Passover. (A different day of dietary disruption.) Who can picture where they were for Passover this past year? Imagine the songs, the food, the absence of chametz piled high on your plate. Now I'm going to take you back to Passover 2012—it's probably a little harder to locate in your mind but I'm sure many of you can picture that one too. I was on my second year in Israel and since Pesach is a great time for vacation—stuff closes, everyone's traveling—I chose to go visit an Israeli friend who had recently moved to China. I did first seder at the Chabad in Shanghai and then got to help lead second seder at their local Reform community. As the 8 days of Passover wound down, my friend told me that we had big plans for the night it ended—we were going to a mimouna party (!) where we would get to eat muffulettas (!!!).

Now when she first said mimouna, a word I didn't recognize, I figured it might be a Chinese thing—but the muffulettas really confused the issue. I'd only ever really heard of muffulettas on Food Network and was pretty sure it was some kind of sandwich you eat in New Orleans. It was also puzzling because my friend and her fellow Israeli ex-pats seemed to all keep

some level of kosher—and my vague notion of muffulettas definitely included pork and maybe cheese too. So I asked several follow-up questions about what and where and why and became astonished when I discovered that in fact—mimouna is a Jewish holiday. A Jewish holiday! That I had never heard of even once. It's a Moroccan Jewish chametz-fest (brilliant) that they do the night Passover is over and the following day—and one of the signature foods is mof-letta (NOT muff-u-letta), which is essentially a thin fried crepe.

I was confused, like I said, but also strangely angry that I had no idea that this holiday existed. I was a lifelong devoted Reform Jew, had experience outside the Reform community as well, and had even completed a year of rabbinic school. Yet discovering a new Jewish holiday made me feel like some kind of dilettante—the opposite of the learned person I aspire to be.

I have since discovered that there are clear and obvious reasons I had never heard of mimouna. Maybe you've thought of the main one already: The vast majority of American Jews are of Ashkenazi descent—Jews who spent the middle ages in central and eastern European lands under Christian rule. Many American Jews don't even know that Moroccan Jews exist, which makes it pretty hard to delve into their unique practices. We here at temple today reflect the largely Ashkenazi makeup of American Jewry: most of us in this sanctuary, including me, are Ashkenazi Jews—though I know we also have Sephardic Jews, Jews by choice, supporters of Jews, and people interested in Judaism. Basically 100% of what we learn and teach in a typical American synagogue (that doesn't specifically identify with any other background), is Ashkenazi customs. Demographically, it makes perfect sense that our temple focuses on living and teaching those customs. It makes perfect sense that our telling of Jewish history focuses on central and eastern Europe, migration to America in the mid 19th to mid 20th centuries, and of course the cataclysmic tragedy of the Holocaust. There's some variation, of course, but we see those as our defining events and patterns. This is generally true in the U.S., and not just in any one particular synagogue or community, but

also to nationwide American perceptions of Jews and Jewish culture. For instance, almost all portrayals of Jews in the American media are of Ashkenazi Jews. Think Yiddish, Seinfeld, bagels, kugel, and names like Goldberg or Steinman—nice, Ashkenazi names that proudly reflect their heritage.

Yet even in the U.S. and especially in Israel, Ashkenazim are only one demographic within Judaism—just one aspect of a larger, more multifaceted story. I had always learned growing up that the two types of Jews are Ashkenazi Jews and Sephardic Jews, and that we were Ashkenazi but there were also these Sephardic Jews who at one point lived in Spain and who did other...unspecified...different...stuff? The main or only time any actual example was given was that Sephardic Jews eat kitniot on Pesach, which means they eat rice, beans, and legumes whereas Ashkenazi Jews traditionally do not. When that's the only description that's ever given, it means that the sole impression we ever get of Sephardic Judaism is that it's probably pretty much the same but more lenient than Ashkenazi Judaism—without telling us anything about what Sephardic Jews actually

do, and how they have their own rich history marked by formative events largely unknown by the Ashkenazi mainstream. We don't learn that just like Ashkenazi Jews had a Jewish hybrid language—Yiddish—and eat foods like stuffed cabbage that many Polish people would also call their own, so did Sephardic Jews speak Ladino and adopt their local foodways which are spicy (!) and totally distinct from the Jewish foods that Ashkenazim know.

Moreover, though, Ashkenazi and Sephardic are NOT the only two types of Judaism. Sephardic Jews were specifically located on the Iberian Peninsula during the middle ages. In that same time period, there were also living, thriving Jewish communities around the middle east in locations that might surprise you—for instance in Syria, Yemen, and Turkey—and their descendants today are referred to as Mizrahi Jews. While they hew closer to Sephardic than Ashkenazi customs, they were also nowhere near Spain and developed their own distinct traditions and customs as well. Not to mention the Jews of Ethiopia or the Central Asian Bukharian Jews. Each with their own historical narrative, music, food, and culture.

In our Jewish prayers—that yes, we all largely share—we have this repeated framework of the acrostic where we use words or verses starting with every letter of the Hebrew alphabet in order to convey the fullness of whatever sentiment we’re expressing. In the Ashrei, in our daily prayers, which some of you may recognize from the afternoon mincha service we do preceding a havdalah bar or bat mitzvah, we use every letter to praise God. Today, on Yom Kippur, in the full version of our *vidui* confession we do a total of three full cycles through the alphabet—Ashamnu goes quickly with just one word per letter, but then Al Cheit is a double acrostic of two phrases per letter detailing ways we have missed the mark. We are concretizing the idea that our missteps span a vast range of territory. Perhaps the most all-in acrostic is Psalm 119, which is a whopping 176 verse OCTUPLE acrostic of longing for God. Yet while we’re good at reciting these words expressing the full spectrum of a feeling, we are not always so good at accepting and welcoming the full spectrum of people who make up our Jewish family in the broadest sense, both inside and outside this sanctuary. Let’s further concretize the full span of the acrostic in our willingness to

include and welcome whomever we encounter in our Jewish spaces.

Because Jews come from all across the globe, speak all kinds of languages and have all kinds of names; we come in all shapes, sizes, and colors; we have abilities and disabilities; we have diverse political affiliations; socioeconomic status; gender identity, sexuality, and family makeup; we identify with different Jewish denominations. That is the real acrostic: world Jewry in its totality.

There's all of this fantastic diversity—and yet we, including myself, have so little awareness of it. I had to consult with Rabbi Tarlan Rabizadeh, a friend of mine who is Persian, to make sure I was getting the Sephardic and Mizrachi terminology right—and as we chatted I was so ashamed by my ignorance as she corrected my misconceptions and pointed me to all kinds of resources I'd never heard of telling her Jewish story that I'd also pretty much never heard of. She shared about the frustration of being in rabbinic school and being the only non-Ashkenazi person on her entire campus—where she seldom if ever saw her own traditions reflected. For instance, the Yom Kippur observances in her Persian community are

joyous, full of dancing and singing, and demanding that God forgive them!

(And, by the way, maybe our own Yom Kippur experience could be enhanced by incorporating some aspect of that totally opposite approach!)

No Jewish article or book I've ever read has described Yom Kippur that way...no illustration I've ever seen has depicted that kind of gathering.

Which creates precisely the larger issue for her and other Jews of “non-standard- Ashkenazi” backgrounds: constantly feeling left out of the proverbial acrostic. Trained professionals are unfamiliar with their ways; Buzzfeed lists, holiday recipes, and newspaper articles don't mirror or honor or mention the customs they grew up with and hold dear, erasing their presence in our Jewish landscape.

I have at times fallen into the trap of thinking that promoting Jewish diversity is about sharing facts, rather than honoring real people with real stories. Earlier I mentioned Passover and picturing your seder—well I know from Rabbi Rabizadeh that Persian Jews have a custom of whipping each other with scallions during Dayenu. I have definitely brought that up, said “isn't that cool?!” and then not really known quite what to do next. What I,



too, have missed, is that \*very cool\* factoids aren't an end in themselves.

Rather, they should serve as a jumping off point to then recognize and tell an under-told story within Judaism: in this case, the story of Jews who lived in Iran for centuries, whose native language is Farsi, which by the way is written in an alphabet based on Arabic letters, and who then largely emigrated out after the Iranian revolution in 1979 which made their lives difficult and threatened their livelihoods. 1979 is so recent in the scheme of the world and its aftermath figures so heavily into Persian Jewish identity. There is inherent value in simply knowing that. But it is vastly more important that by even knowing the barest of bones of that story, you are so much better equipped to be inclusive, to be kind, and to just \*be cool\* when you come across a Persian Jew. Which doesn't mean you would open by asking what their family did in 1979. In fact, I would recommend a warmup period before charging in and asking anyone about their personal family background. But it certainly does mean that the first interaction won't include the perhaps goodhearted but truly minimizing question of "wow, there are Jews from Iran?!" If a Jewish person is standing in front of you telling you that they are from somewhere, indeed, there are Jewish people

there. And they, too, are part of the acrostic--and want to feel like they are part of the acrostic as well.

And although I've started by sharing my friend's story, this is obviously meant to apply to any person or family who is from a background that feels different or unusual to the majority. Most especially, it should apply to anyone who is already a part of our temple community. I think back to my own home temple—and when I was a kid a family joined who had just emigrated from the former Soviet Union. I know there's a really strong Russian community here—but there it was that one Jewish family, this one boy my age. I cannot even imagine what his life was like. And I was about ten at the time, so I don't fully trust my own memory, but I don't think anyone actually tried to help us imagine what his life was like; what his journey had been. I don't recall anyone ever explaining why his family moved to the U.S. as part of this tremendous Jewish migration or what they were leaving in their old life. I think that that story of Jewish diversity would have profoundly impacted how we saw that boy—and I wonder how he would have felt having his story being held up as a special story, a story

of value. It is possible he would not have liked that, or not wanted more attention drawn to him...but it's possible that it would have been really meaningful to him for us to see him not just as someone who didn't know any of the things about Judaism that we did...but rather someone who had lived an authentic Jewish story, a tough Jewish story. A story that we could learn from and empathize with, and that could help him take pride in his identity as just as legitimately Jewish as our own, rather than second-rate or less than. Because in the best of worlds, highlighting diversity is not a theoretical exercise at all but a way to build understanding and strengthen relationships and help everyone feel like appreciated equals.

Because the Jewish community—our Jewish community, today, right now—is way more diverse than most people realize. But when I went to pull up the statistics to prove this point to you, I was shocked at how difficult it was. It turns out that this absence of numbers is a well-documented phenomenon, and in fact part of the problem of under-recognition of Jewish diversity. An organization called JIMENA, which stands for Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, explains: “Mizrachi and

Sephardic Jews...have been vastly undercounted, miscounted and inconsistently included in Jewish demographic studies across the board”<sup>1</sup>. The famed Pew Study of 2013, a recent treasure trove of vast quantities of demographic data, did not ask respondents to identify as Ashkenazi, Sephardic, Mizrachi, or anything else. JIMENA also notes the dearth of data about Jews of Color, which the Reform Movement’s Religious Action Center defines as “a pan-ethnic term that is used to identify Jews whose family origins are originally in African, Asian or Latin-American countries...or [are] of mixed heritage such as biracial or multi-racial”<sup>2</sup>. Although Temple Beth El is majority white, we have members—Jewish members!—of many races, and the Steinhardt Social Research Institute [...] reports that 11% of Jews in the United States are Jews of Color<sup>3</sup>.

I want to spend a minute on this since that 11% might sound like a surprisingly or confusingly large number to you. It’s certainly more than I would have guessed. Since Jews of Color can often be identified easily by

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.jweekly.com/2019/09/17/sephardic-and-mizrachi-jews-deserve-to-be-counted/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://rac.org/embracing-racial-diversity-our-synagogues-who-are-jews-color-joc>

<sup>3</sup> <https://rac.org/embracing-racial-diversity-our-synagogues-who-are-jews-color-joc>

their appearance, we might extrapolate that if their numbers are that large, we should be seeing more of them at temple and in other mainstream Jewish institutions. But actually, looking different than the typical white Jewish person makes Jews of Color easy targets for aggressive if well-intended questioning, on one end of the spectrum, or being ignored and stared right through, on the other end. Leah Donella, an NPR editor and producer who is black and Jewish, published an NPR opinion piece about an experience on this very day, on Yom Kippur, back a few years ago. She went to services along with her white and non-Jewish boyfriend and was distraught by how “people greeted him first, always...[how] someone explained to [her] what to expect of the service [assuming she’d never been to a synagogue before]...and [how] an usher smiled and asked [her], not [her] boyfriend, *What brings you here?*”<sup>4</sup> She wrote that article two years after that experience—and hadn’t been back to a synagogue since. This is a sentiment I’ve heard expressed by Jews of Color over and over—they are tired of being assumed not to be Jewish, tired of being asked how or why they are Jewish, tired of people thinking they are the hired help. Many of them—not all, no experience is universal, but many of them, especially if

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<sup>4</sup><https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/10/12/496868502/black-jewish-and-avoiding-the-synagogue-on-yom-kippur>

they're new to a community, field these misconceptions all the time, they get fatigued of being perpetually on the defensive, and then they stop showing up. Because it doesn't feel worth the constant struggle to explain themselves. And then, though, some of them choose to tell their stories: there are tons of articles and books written by Jews of Color, and I especially want to highlight an incredible Eli Talk—a Jewish spin on the TED Talk—by Rabbi Shaïs Rishon detailing the responses he gets over and over as an African-American Orthodox Jew—born from two African-American Orthodox Jewish parents<sup>5</sup>. Look him up, he also goes by the pseudonym Ma Nishtana, and let him tell you how it feels to know so deeply you are part of the acrostic—but to be repeatedly told that you are mistaken, and you are not.

Because the most powerful encounter with Jewish diversity is to hear directly from another person—and I \*do\* realize the \*extreme\* irony, with me standing up here doing my best to highlight these cultures and experiences that are not my own. Which is why I am so excited to introduce

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6dZid5Trb5U>

a new temple initiative starting this year chaired by board member Alicia Chandler. She is heading up an Audacious Hospitality Workgroup—that will focus on how we, here at temple, accommodate and honor diversity in our community and make temple a more inclusive home for all. Alicia is specifically focusing on Sephardic and Mizrachi Jews, interfaith families, Jews with disabilities, LGBTQ Jews, and Jews of Color—and if you identify with any of those descriptions, we absolutely want your voice to be heard!! We want you to be a part of identifying our blind spots and highlighting what we can do differently here on the bimah as well as encourage in this community. Please give us a call and we're happy to connect you to Alicia. Moreover, if you belong to a traditionally marginalized group that you think is not covered, you are all the more welcome to connect with the group as we attempt to honor all the letters of the acrostic.

So as 5780 dawns. Every person in here has the power to make someone feel like they are welcome and wanted in our Jewish spaces—or to make them feel like they are trespassing. Please choose, no matter what someone's appearance or background, to treat them as if they

belong—which is how we collectively make them feel like they belong.

Explore the heritage of Jews unlike you—by reading, by watching that Eli Talk, by listening to a podcast—there’s no shortage of content out there to introduce you to the customs of people you already know or might meet.

Also consider exploring your own heritage. Ashkenazi Judaism isn’t a monolith either, and Ashkenazi Jews have stories and local customs that vary by city, region, or country just like Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews do.

Most of all, in the new year, we need acceptance—but for the acrostic to be truly complete, we need you. No matter what your background. Please come claim your place as a valuable member of this Temple Beth El community in its acrostic fullness, from aleph all the way to tav, from A all the way to Z.