

I love being Jewish. I always have. From the moment I knew I was Jewish, I found a home in the prayers, larger-than-me concepts, values and sense of community that were infused in everything we did. I was aware, however, that I was different from my peers. For most of my time in Jewish day school, I was the only one I knew with lesbian moms. My identity as a child of Lesbian parents, some of us call ourselves queerspawn, remained separate from my daily life as a Jew.

My family joined Sha'ar Zahav, and I immediately knew this was a place where my worlds could merge. My Jewish community became the one consistent place where there were mirrors for my family structure. I felt at home. I was able to explore my Jewish identity because I could put aside the pressure of defending my family. I knew that I belonged here amongst Jews, even if others would not see my family that way.

People who know me often comment on how Jewish I am because of my consistent involvement in Jewish community. People who don't know me often comment on how Jewish I look, because of my fair skin, brown wavy hair, and sizable nose. In other words, here in this community, I pass as a Jew.

Because of the diverse ways we create our families, many of my fellow Jewish queerspawns do not share my Ashkenazi features. They may have sperm donors of color, they may be raised in multi-racial and interfaith families, they may be adopted. Our families are complicated - queerly created in all meanings of the word. And it is not a new phenomenon that Jews of color do not pass as I do in American Jewish communities. My whiteness is a privilege I cannot deny.

Today's Parshah, Netzivim, describes our community in all its diversity and in detail not previously used in the Torah. We read about the end of our wanderings in the desert, standing at the banks of the Jordan River, about to cross as a people without our leader. Here, we read about Moses giving us the last covenant before we set out on our own, reminding us how we should act as a people. Our covenant is given on the condition that we work for the interest of the community, which is in turn our own self-interest. We are all standing at the banks of the river, commanded to think beyond ourselves. All of us – the leaders, elders, children, people of all genders, the stranger, those who labor for our needs, and those who are not here physically or spiritually –

We stand here today, just like we stood before on the banks of the Jordan River. A large group, embarking on a journey into a new year, waiting to see if we will cross over the river into the joyous land of a renewed year in the Book of Life. Just as we were then we are now, standing as a community, unsure of the future but still making personal covenants to do our best to take care of each other and ourselves.

Who may be standing here, but feels like a stranger? My Jewish community is a safe place for me, but that does not mean it is a safe space for every queerspawn. Our community is built with so much care and intention for our families, but it still may not be comfortable for all of us. Particularly, Jewish multi-racial families like mine and Jewish families created through trans-racial adoption may struggle with this conundrum. When is it important to believe that love makes a family, and that love is colorblind? And when is it also essential to remember that love is not always enough to shield our families from racism? What can we do, as family and community, to alleviate the pain brought by our own ignorance? I know we have the capacity in our hearts and mouths to make change in our community.

I recently had a conversation with a local Rabbi about his concerns in serving young people with Queer parents through the B'nai Mitzvah process. He was upset that he didn't know the polite way to ask about the students' family history to determine if they were, indeed, Jewish. The rabbi was worried that when these students left the bubble of the Bay Area, they would need tools to verify their place in the Jewish community.

Our families are complicated, unique, and so, incredibly holy. The ways we are Jewish are equally complicated. What happens when a child of Lesbians is raised to be a Jew, but the birth mother is not Jewish? The child's mother is Jewish, because she has two. Why must the child be reminded that, in our society, her lack of shared genetics undermines the authenticity of her family? That the people she knows as her parents are not validated as real parents by our tradition? What happens when our beloved tradition is entrenched in homophobia and heterosexism? I know I raise complicated questions, but we are used to this. There are no easy answers to questions about queer families.

I began to explain to the rabbi that for many of our families, a piece of paper will not be enough to convince others of our Jewish identities.

That total ease and acceptance through the B'nai Mitzvah process will go much farther for youth with families like mine than a certificate verifying Jewish identity through birth or conversion. We need Jewish community where we don't need to defend ourselves at every life cycle event. A strong Jewish identity fostered in a loving community is a tool more powerful than any other. I encouraged him to rethink the importance of those supposedly essential questions, rather than looking for sensitive language. In this case, we need love above all else.

And sometimes love is blinding. We want to believe that loving and accepting community is all we need. Because of our love for our family and community members, it is painful for us to see them struggle, and we unconsciously do not see their pain. It is easy to forget that even fierce love is not enough to keep racism, ableism, heterosexism and transphobia at bay. We forget that even if we create a community free of homophobia, we have not built a community immune to all other forms of discrimination. And we forget that mirrors for our experience in our family may not be the mirrors other family members need. Both my sister and I need other Jewish Queer families in our lives, but I must be aware that my sister is a Jew of color, and she

needs different support in our community than I do. She moves through the Jewish world with greater barriers. My love for her cannot blind me to that.

On Yom Kippur, we mimic the Parshah – standing together in prayer while deep in personal te’shuvah. Today, I repent for those times when I ran ahead, forgetting that some of my peers cannot navigate with the same ease; forgetting that although we all stood there together to receive the covenant – a promise of prosperity - we are not all able to claim it here and now. Young Jews of color are still forced to explain their families in a place we believe is free from that pressure.

Te’shuvah is a reflection and returning, not to the same place again, but to a new place; a transformation. Today is a day of great grief for the past year, but also of renewal for the next. Sometimes, I am overwhelmed by the difficulty of building a community for all. There are too many hurdles. I grieve over the mistakes and opportunities I missed in the last year to be a good ally. And I grieve over the opportunities our community has missed to check our racism.

Our portion for the day gives us a gift; a reminder that we are capable. Moses reminds us that being true to the covenant, and being responsible to all people within it, is

within reach. It is not in the heavens for someone to bring to you, it is not across the sea for someone to bring to you, it is within reach, in your heart and in your mouth.

I know the power to change my community is within me. It is not fair for me to wait for my queerspawn peers to demand attention. This year, on the holiest of days, my te'shuvah is to confidently move forward with love, do my part to recognize our diversity instead of ignoring it in the name of love, and to be vocal about how we have needs beyond those of other Jewish kids. I ask you to make the same commitment.

As we renew our covenant today, let us remember how we started as a people together on the banks of the river, and spread to a beautiful Diaspora. We have learned to redefine what it means to be Jewish every moment in every corner of the world. We have done this to take care of ourselves as a people, and to build sustainable Jewish identity amongst oppression, secularism, modernism, and globalization. And I want to remember how we got here as a congregation. We come from different experiences and relationships with Judaism. Many who did not grow up in this congregation came to it from a wandering – we come from places of exclusion to where we can be our whole selves, Queer and

allied Jews. We must do what we can so that this legacy will continue. We each must take part in creating a community in which our youth and families can thrive. This year, in this place. We cannot wait.