

This Passover, Choose Judaism

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My wife and I are an interracial couple. I am a White, Ashkenazi Jewish man from New York. She is a Black woman from Detroit, raised in the Lutheran faith, who converted (to Jewish, not to White. She's still Black). Our 3 year old Biracial son is Jewish.

When I talk about my wife's conversion, rather than saying she converted I like to say that she's Jewish by choice. I do this because conversion sounds like the process by which a sofa becomes an uncomfortable bed. Or it sounds like something that happens by magic. I wave my magic wand and "poof" you're Jewish. Whereas being a Jewish person by choice requires a conscious affirmative decision.

And make no mistake, being Jewish is a choice, whether you were born into our Tribe or whether you joined us midway through the show. Because being Jewish isn't easy. For starters, there's the fact that lots of people hate us. Then, there's the fact that in this nation and the world we're outsiders. Yes, we manage to assimilate wherever we reside, but as history shows us, Jews, no matter how much a part of the society in which we live, are still always a bit on the outside. And, of course, there are all the rules. Don't eat this. Don't eat that. Don't eat at all. Love the stranger, but don't intermarry with them. Don't wear wool and linen together. Wear a tiny hat that's exactly the right size to never stay on your head. Sit outside during football season in a shed that has porous walls and no roof. Pursue justice, but by the same

token, it's not a problem to have slaves if you're generally nice to them. Count the Omer (once you figure out what the Omer is). Read, study and love this book that's inconveniently not provided on an iPad but is in the form of a giant, heavy scroll. And, if you drop that book, you're not allowed to eat for a day (or 40).

Given these inherent challenges to leading a Jewish life, why did my wife choose to be Jewish. Well, obviously, it's because being a Black woman in America was just way too easy, and she needed a challenge.

In America, as we know from demographic data (and from walking into synagogue on Saturday mornings . . . that is, for those of us who wake up early enough to do that), there aren't that many Jews "of color" in America. There are some, and the numbers are growing all the time. But, if you walk into any Congregation Bet Something or Temple Something Shalom and for sure if you walk into Agudath Something (the Orthodox shul) on any given Saturday, even in New York City, you're not going to see that many Black people.

And, that's unfortunate for any number of reasons. First of all, given where Jews—Hebrews—originated (just a stone's throw from North and East Africa), it's a good bet that many of us were Black (or to use a modern phrase "Blackish"). Did Abraham or Moses look like Denzel Washington? Maybe not. But, it's likely that they looked more like him (or maybe Omar Sharif in *Lawrence of Arabia*) than they looked like your Uncle Sol or your Grandpa Murray. Which means somewhere along the way we lost some color.

Second, there is a parallel between the Jewish experience in Egypt (and the Exodus therefrom) and the history of African-Americans. Indeed, as we approach the Passover holiday, it is apt to remember that the struggle for freedom and self-determination in Ancient Egypt and in this country are stories with similar narratives. In fact, the parallels are so strong, that because of my wife's (and our son's) background, and to make her family feel more at home when they celebrate the holiday with us, we've modified our Seder to create a fusion of these two stories and created a Haggadah that reflects the flight to freedom of both cultures:

"When we were slaves in Egypt . . . and the Southern United States. Moses . . . and Dr. King said, "let my people go." When they were refused, God . . . and the NAACP, set forth 10 plagues . . . and many lawsuits. And, the people went out, and they searched for years, till they could find a homeland where they could be free and enjoy self determination. We speak of course of the land of Brooklyn. Where Blacks and Jews roam free, even to this day."

Then we eat matzah and play the game "guess which Biracial Hollywood actor is Black and Jewish."

We don't actually say all that, but I do think it. Because our family isn't just Jewish. It's Black and Jewish, and it's important to remember the history of both those cultures and how much they sync up.

So, why did my wife choose Judaism? Well, I like to think it's because she loved me and becoming Jewish was just a small price to pay to be able to spend a lifetime with me and my neuroses.

More importantly, though, I think it's because she saw in the story of the Jewish people a story that she already knew from her vantage point as a Black person, and that story was comfortable and familiar and filled with the same themes of exodus

and freedom.

But, most importantly of all, I think it's because choosing is at the very core of what it means to live a fulfilling life, especially a fulfilling Jewish life. Indeed, to my mind, that we are the "Chosen People" refers not to the fact that we were chosen for some special status so much as it refers to the fact that each day, each Jewish person must affirmatively choose whether they will follow the mitzvot or not.

So, why did my wife choose Judaism? For the same reason the slaves of Egypt chose it—she wanted to be free to live life on terms she consciously agreed to rather than those that had been selected and mandated for her.

Why do you choose?

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