



The Endless Jewish Audience

A Japanese Jewish convert speaks



In Kenji Yoshino's book *Covering*, he compares Samuel Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* to his coming out as a gay man. Coleridge's main character, a sailor, must continually tell the story of how he killed the albatross as penance for his sin. Yoshino says, "he is compelled to speak and they are compelled to listen. So he tells and tells, hoping one day to tell the story well enough, or often enough, that he will no longer need to tell it."

This is how I feel as a Japanese Jewish convert. Whenever I walk into a new social situation whether a synagogue, a Shabbat dinner or a Judaica store there is always the chance that I will have to tell my conversion story to a confused, sometimes judgmental, audience.

In the parking lot of my son's Hebrew day school, a woman said, hands making a circular motion in the shape of my round Asian face, "What's up with your face?" At a sushi Kiddush, ironically, as I was waiting on line for maki rolls -yarmulke on and flegling a transliterated siddur- a woman asked me to get more plates for the Jewish congregants. Early in our marriage, my wife would preface that I am a "ger" (convert) as to avoid uncomfortable questions and stares. "Ahh," with detectable relief, is the typical response.

I've often done the same thing just so I could get on with things. When will I not need to answer such questions? When "normative" Judaism is comfortable with a Jew of Color. Much like larger society, Ashkenazi Jews have white privilege. You don't walk up to an Ashkenazi woman in a skirt with tichel (headscarf) on and say, "What is up with your face?" There is a comfortable assumption that this woman is Jewish because she looks and behaves like the "normative" Ashkenazi Jew. No questions, no stares, no angling for a personal history.



Sometimes people will come up and ask, feigning matter-of-factness, “Where are you from?” “Long Island” is usually not sufficient. Yoshino says, succinctly, “Coming out is a process as endless as its audience.”

My mother married a Japanese immigrant. I’m a first generation Japanese American. Growing up, our house was always about blending cultures. It was not a conscious deliberate act, it just happened because my parents were open to that blending. There was no perceived threat to their histories and backgrounds.

On the flip side, there was assimilation in order to survive. My father changed his name from Hisaaki to Mike. I sometimes pulled the Irish card to pass in a conspicuously white environment. I often stayed away from Asian girls because the association accentuated my Asian-ness. Eric Lui, in his book *The Accidental Asian*, talks about the whitewashing of his yellowness to the point where being Asian was just an “accident” of his assimilated self. Now he refers to himself as “an assimilist in recovery.” As a multicultural Jew, there is reclamation to understand and inhabit all of my cultures.

Recently, I learned that my Jewish great-grandfather, who hid his Judaism, was one of ten siblings. Turns out I am related to Friedlanders, Mendelsohns and Jacobsohns just to name a few. Names like Fruma, Tauba, and Hirsch had my mother quip, rather Jewishly, “Were not Jewish, we’re really Jewish.”

My Japanese father always had rice and nori (Japanese seaweed) on-call to supplement whatever American dish we were eating. My Irish Russian mother who grew up in Brooklyn made corned beef and cabbage and Beef Stroganoff. I was confirmed in a Methodist church. I ate the body and blood of Christ and dripped wine on my confirmation gown. Today, I eat challah, say Kiddush on Friday nights, and sometimes dribble kosher wine on my kittel. Reclamation.

In my house, the rice cooker gets more use than the cholent pot, but that does not make me any less Jewish. Soy sauce not schmaltz is a staple. My two sons are named Boaz and Simcha Bunim, but their last name is as Japanese as it gets. It is also as Jewish as it gets.

My story changes as I become more comfortable living as a Jew and society becomes more comfortable with me

living as a Jew. Narrative therapists use a technique called “re-authoring,” where unhealthy stories are talked into healthier stories. In *Narrative Therapy: The Social Constructs of Preferred Reality*, Jill Freedman and Gene Combs state: “As people begin to inhabit and live out the alternative stories, the results are beyond solving problems. Within new stories, people live out new self images, new possibilities for relationships and new futures.”

In my healthier story, I am now a third generation Jewish American. Not that it’s anyone’s business, yet I still feel compelled to tell my story to a seemingly endless audience. Being authentically understood, though, for better or worse, is the first step towards acceptance. Each new audience is an opportunity to move closer to that acceptance. ✧

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