

Yachatz: Parts of a Whole

By Julia White, 2021-2022 Kol Koleinu Fellow

In a traditional Passover seder, 3 pieces of matzo (matzot) are used. During Yachatz, the middle one in the stack is removed and broken in half. The smaller half is replaced in between the top and bottom matzot, but the larger half is placed in a special bag and used as the afikomen (see Tzafun). In order to examine what happens when parts of our identities may undergo a similar fractured or disjointed experience. I spoke to a close friend, Sarai Brown-Ratner, about her experiences as a Jew of color in predominately white Jewish spaces, as well as in predominately Christian Black spaces. About the former, Sarai expressed,

"I do notice that [being Black] going to JSU. I've gone to a couple meetings and I'm the only Black person there and it's a little weird. People don't say anything, it's just kind of this constant noticing that you're kind of alone, despite being in an affinity space where you're supposed to feel connected to other people.

I think a lot of times going to Black affinity spaces there's an assumption that when you're Black that you're Christian. There's a huge culture around the church, and when you're not a part of that's, it's a little weird. It's like a little weird when people, when Black people assume that you have those experiences and I don't, so there's kind of like an 'oh then you're not as Black as other Black people,' even though I'm still having a sense of spirituality, which is a very cultural thing in the black community but it's not the right kind of spirituality.

My mom is a lot more intentional with her Judaism. It feels a lot more important to her that she's passing it on to her daughter, versus my dad who grew up with it, so it's there but he's not really thinking about it.

There are so few Jews of color that I think my mom also has to sort of prove that she's Jewish because people aren't going to just automatically assume... She mentions it [being Jewish] a lot in passing to other people."

Sarai comes from a family that passes down a variety of different legacies. Her mother is Black and a convert to Judaism but has been integrally involved in both her own and Sarai's Jewish experiences. Sarai's father is white and was raised Jewish, but does not necessarily share the same intentionality when it comes to passing Judaism down to Sarai. In the stories that Sarai and her mother have shared, some parts of their identities are prioritized over others, eg. Blackness over Jewishness when people assume their faith based on their skin color. Therefore, the inheritance that Sarai has received from her parents is a deeply intersectional one. Sarai expressed feeling a similar pressure to "prove" her Judaism to her peers who perceive only her Blackness, while also navigating Blackness in primarily white Jewish spaces. In her eyes, these limiting perceptions and spaces can feel a bit like the middle matzo– different parts that fit together as a whole, but not quite the same as the unified top and bottom matzot.