

Shana tova. My name is Lianna and some of you may recognize me. About this time of year in October thirteen years ago, I became Bat Mitzvah in this congregation. Life was simpler back then, for example I didn't have to pay bills, worry about rent, or figure out when I have time to go to the DMV. Honestly, like every teenager, I thought I'd already figured out the "who I am" question. But in fact, on the occasion of being double my Bat Mitzvah age, I can tell you that I had barely started.

A little more than 26 years ago, I think there was a conversation that went like this:

"So...soul number 1 billion 237, we've received and accepted your application to be a human. You are going to be a woman, intelligent, live in 21<sup>st</sup> century United States."

"Yes, sounds good, can I be Jewish?"

"Yes."

"And for fun...can I also be Asian?"

"What? Are you sure?"

\*nod\*

"...Okay. You know that's going to be challenging...you have guilt built into both sides of your genes."

"I'm up for the challenge."

Let me tell you, I got what I wished. Jews are a people who wrestle with themselves for good and for bad. My struggle for the last few years is what makes a Jew a Jew. Am I a Jew? More importantly, am I comfortable being a Jew because that is what I was raised with, or am I comfortable as a Jew because it is the spiritual spring of well-being for me? Being a Jew is easy and comfortable as a child when your parents can vouch for your existence in the community. This starts to change as you move away from the congregation you grow up in.

I remember a European classmate (gentile, might I add), after having found out that I am Jewish, said directly to my face "You are not Jewish. Jews are a bloodline and you're Asian not Jewish." I have been asked at a Jewish retreat if I am Jewish. My answer was "this is a *Jewish* retreat." I was stared down by and overly suspicious woman at a Purim shpiel. Funnily enough while all of this is going on, some of my friends at Stanford called me the most Jewish person they knew because I liked going to Kabbalat Shabbat services every week at Hillel. I think this habit was partially due to the fact they had free dinner on Friday nights and great company.

Then I did the next best thing for my Jewish identity: I moved to China for two years. Suddenly, I was living in a place where the only reaction to "I'm Jewish" was utter confusion or, "Oh...Jews are very smart, Marx was Jewish." Working in China made me more aware of my Asian side, but the more Asian I felt, the less Jewish I felt. It was getting to feel more and more like my identity was mutually exclusive. Without a Jewish community to ground me, I was in isolation. I started to ask, does the Jewish world accept me as a person who is multifaceted? Is

there a place for me in this sphere that is okay with me being a person of color, a converted adoptee, and a feminist?

The answer that I keep coming up with is “No.” No, I cannot be a feminist and a Jew when the Rabbi Rabinowitz allows an 80:20 men/women split of Western Wall. No, I can’t be a person of color and a Jew because of “Ashkenormativity.” No, I’m not a Jew because an orthodox rabbi refused to officiate my conversion ceremony. No, I can’t be a Jew for a zillion reasons and I was left thinking, “Doesn’t it seem like the Jewish community is small and does itself such a disservice refusing and rejecting its own?”

Here is what I’ve realized: though there are a zillion reasons for me not to be a Jew, I have a zillion and one reasons to be a Jew. I can be an alternative voice, and provide a different view point and wrestle with the ideas that challenge me. Moreover, I had to learn how to forgive those who challenged me because our biggest critics can also be our greatest teachers. After all, isn’t that what we do as Jews? The beauty of what we do as a people is question and ask. We rarely take our way of life at face value. So I ask you, what challenging question will you ask yourself this next year? What new point of view will you allow yourself be open to? And most importantly, what will you forgive yourself and other members of your community for? Thank you, and shana tova.