

Laughter

Devorah is a Black Ashkenazi Jew. When she was 12 years old, she was sitting alone in a hotel lobby waiting for her parents to come down from their room. She was wearing her Star of David necklace, a gift when she became Bat Mitzvah. As she was waiting, a White older Jewish man approached her and asked why she was wearing her Star, if she was Jewish and did she know what her necklace meant. She replied that she was Jewish, at which point he started laughing and said “ What! This is so funny. How can this be?”

Devorah became very anxious and was very uncomfortable. Not knowing how to respond, she just smiled up at him. That day she took off her Jewish Star necklace and hasn't worn it since. Now at 30 years old the necklace remains in a box in her Mother's drawer.

Questions:

1. What motivated this man to approach a young person?
2. What enabled him to feel entitled to challenge her with questions and then burst out laughing? What kind of teaching or resource from his Jewish community could have prevented him from feeling this entitlement and helped him to be more sensitive?
3. What type of tikkun/repair is needed for Devorah, for her mother, for their Jewish community?
4. What could you have done at the moment as a bystander?
5. What would allow Devorah to experience her community as a place she could find repair?

Seder Performance

Sarah, a Black Jew, was asked to sing Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" at a social justice themed seder. The song, a heart-wrenching elegy for African-Americans lynched in the Deep South was pitched to her as "significant to both the Black and Jewish communities." Sarah said that after she performed the song, the others at the seder just clapped and moved on. There was no discussion about the meaning or the history of the lyrics. She felt tokenized, like she had been invited just to be visibly Black and Jewish, without any thought to what that actually involved on any substantive level. "I was 20 and didn't know better, and I wouldn't do it again," she later reflected.

Questions

1. Why does engaging the song's meaning and history matter to Sarah?
2. What does the group's response reveal about how they perceive the song's presence at the seder? What were some options for the group to respond at the Seder or afterwards?
3. Why would the seder organizers be interested in highlighting Sarah's Black and Jewish identity? How is that different from being interested in Sarah as a person and member of the community?
4. What type of tikkun/repair is needed here? What might be a way for the community to prevent this type of thing happening in the future? For Sarah?
5. How could the community equip members like Sarah who might encounter this in other settings?

Juneteenth

A small, suburban Reconstructionist synagogue decided at their late April board meeting that they would like to have a Juneteenth commemoration and celebration in the service of allyship for African Americans. A white board member, Ted, volunteered to be on the planning committee. Ted reached out to Shoshana, one of two African American members of the synagogue, to be part of the committee. Shoshana seemed hesitant but agreed. At the first planning meeting in May, Ted asked Shoshana if she would be willing to be in charge of bringing Juneteenth-appropriate food for the kiddush and of finding someone to speak during the d'var Torah slot, clearly the lion's share of the program planning. Ted offered to organize publicity and outreach. A few weeks after the planning meeting, not long before Juneteenth, Shoshana sent an email to the rabbi noting that she had a pretty full work life and that she felt stressed about the time crunch of having to put this program together. Meanwhile, Ted expressed frustrations to the rabbi that he couldn't move forward with publicity without knowing who the speaker would be.

Questions

1. What are the issues at play in this scenario about intentional or unintentional harm? Where do you notice the insensitivities of Ted or the Board?
2. How would you respond to Shoshana as the rabbi? How would you respond to Ted? What would you do in Shoshana's shoes?
3. What type of tikkun/repair is needed here?
4. What planning sensitivities could have led to a different outcome?

My Family

The fourth-grade class at Reconstructionist Congregation Ahavat Shalom led by Morah Marsha was focusing their first unit on Torah stories about the families in Genesis (Abraham/Sarah, Isaac/Rebekkah, etc.). To start off the unit, the teacher suggested that each student fill out a two-page "About My Family" sheet that included a space for photos, names for parents and siblings, a box for favorite Jewish holiday and Jewish food, and a box to write a sentence about your family's immigration journey to America, along with a picture or cutout picture from a magazine. This assignment puzzled Joshua, a student in the class whose father is African American and Jewish. He got the feeling that he was only supposed to talk about his mom's family's immigration journey when her relatives left Lvov, Ukraine to make their way to New York. Though it made him uncomfortable, Joshua decided to do the minimum required, and did not share much in the class discussion the following week. Joshua's lack of participation surprised Morah Marsha, so she asked him if he had a problem with the assignment. To his surprise, he said "Yes. The way you worded this assignment you left out my dad's family." Morah Marsha answered, "But he's a convert." Joshua interrupted, "No, he's not! My lineage on his side is as long, if not longer than my mom's."

Questions

1. What is the racial harm in this scenario? Is there more than one?
2. How could Morah Marsha have designed the assignment to prevent, reduce, if not eliminate racial harm?
3. How could she have engaged Joshua differently?
4. Who else could have intervened in advance of the discussion?
5. What other type of Tikkun/Repair might be needed in this situation?

Security

A small-sized Reconstructionist congregation has been grappling with the issue of security. The congregation received a fake bomb threat email six months earlier—along with all the other synagogues in the area—and a nearby synagogue was vandalized with swastika graffiti the year before. While the board was waiting to see if any of their security grant applications would be approved, they discussed whether they should hire a security guard in the meantime using their rainy-day fund. For most of the fifteen-person board, there was consensus on having the security guard posted, but there was concern among some about depleting the rainy-day fund too quickly.

Jake, the board's only person of color, had significant reservations. He was worried that people of color might be unfairly singled out and scrutinized by a security guard. His own relatives might have a negative experience visiting the synagogue. He mustered up the courage to share these concerns at the board discussion, but no one seemed to budge from their position. The rabbi, too, was silent in the discussion, feeling somewhat strongly herself in favor of hiring a guard. The board voted to secure a security guard for major services and events for the next 3 months and reevaluate after that point. Jake left the meeting discouraged and seemed more convinced not to re-up his board service for a second term.

Questions

1. How do you understand the racial harm caused in this scenario? Was it purely personal or was there an institutional dimension?
2. What might have been some alternative responses by the board to Jake's concerns? By the rabbi? What other options does Jake have?
3. How are discussions where there are competing values of importance better handled?
4. What type of tikkun/repair is needed for Jake? For others?