



Empowering Jews of color in Jewish spaces

By: Mae Sarah

From a young age, I have understood deeply how Jewish spaces, in many cases, do not make their doors wide enough for all identities.

The week before Tawonga's JEDI fellowship (Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion) began, fellows were sent the recording of an [interview](#) with Yavilah McCoy to watch prior to our first meeting. Yavilah is the CEO of Dimensions Inc., a nonprofit organization that provides educational training on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

While discussing the number of communities Yavilah is a part of as an African-American, Jewish woman, she said: "Intersectionality means that what[ever] door I go into, I try to make that door wide enough for me to bring all of my identities into that door without having to leave any of them behind."

This quote resonated with me because of my experiences feeling like the door was not wide enough for me in many Jewish spaces.

One of the first memories I have of being in a Jewish space took place when my mom brought me to synagogue for the first (and only) time. My mom grew up going to synagogue on holidays when she was a child but hadn't been back since she was a teenager.

I was six or seven years old when she took me to a Shabbat service one night at our local synagogue in Oakland. She walked through the doors – my white mom carrying her brown child, as members of the synagogue walked past her. She watched as other new members were greeted at the door and offered food and a place to sit. My mom remembers people looking at the two of us strangely, and asking intrusive questions about our family and my upbringing. She left feeling angry that this space was not the accepting community she had remembered it to be as a child. She also felt uncomfortable, as she realized she'd brought me into a community where I was not welcomed.

This is why Yavilah's quote stuck with me so intensely. From a young age, I have understood deeply how Jewish spaces, in many cases, do not make their doors wide enough for all identities.

Flash forward to March of this year: I am one of 20 fellows in Tawonga's JEDI Fellowship (half of us identifying as People of Color), exploring identity reflection, racial justice and multiracial Jewish Peoplehood (among other topics) during workshops together.

During our third fellowship meeting, we were joined on our zoom call by a panel of [five Jews of color](#): Ariela Ronay-Jinich, Arielle Rivera Korman, David McCarty-Caplan, Eddie Chavez Calderon and Jordan Daniels. These panelists are all doing work which in some way connects to the topic of Jewish education and various forms of activism. Panel members were social workers working with at-risk LGBT youth, founders of Jewish education organizations, and leaders of racial justice organizations. Many of them had personal connections to the Tawonga community.

While discussing their experiences as people of color in Jewish spaces and in the community as a whole, I heard many experiences similar to mine – and one which was almost exactly identical. Hearing the experiences of these panelists affirmed many of my own experiences as a Jewish person of color, and this was incredibly validating. I am thankful to have been a part of this safe space to both listen and share with confidence.

I was reminded in this Zoom call how rare the feeling of complete comfort can be for people of color to find in many Jewish spaces.. I realized, in fact, how common my experiences are, which has made me feel even more determined to share my journey and to build safe spaces for people of color in my Jewish communities.

I am excited to see how changes like the creation of the JEDI fellowship can encourage spaces like Tawonga to continue to widen their door and make space for a vast range of identities. As I am about to begin my third summer as a Tawonga counselor, I feel ready to help create and support an environment that encourages individuals to bring their full selves to Camp.

Mae spent four summers at Tawonga as a camper and is currently working on the summer staff as a counselor for her third summer. She recently graduated from Cabrillo Community College and is starting as a transfer student at UC Santa Cruz in the fall and will major in Environmental Studies.

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