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Making Spaces for **JEWIS OF COLOR**

If you were to imagine what I, the author of this article, look like, I'm confident that you would come up with an image of someone who looks nothing like me. Although now that I've told you that, you may be able to guess ... I'm not white. As a Black queer Jew by Choice, it can be difficult for me to feel at home in the wider Jewish community. Instead of looking for permission to exist or validation to fit in, I began making space for myself.



When I chose to be Jewish, I took to Judaism at breakneck speed. I saw in Jewish traditions ways of remembering painful pasts while working toward a better future for the world and wished I knew of similar rituals and practices that

existed in the Black community. Within months I had turned my home into a Moishe House; my spouse and I became volunteer community builders, hosting and facilitating regular Jewish programming out of our home for young adults 22-32 years old. I now have a major role in strengthening my local Jewish community and the opportunity to create the Jewish spaces that I want to exist in.

Concurrently, I was experiencing severe depression and anxiety because of burnout in emergency medicine, which doubled during the pandemic.

Health disparities across race and class that are always present in medicine became glaring and debilitating through COVID-19. My own health struggles made it physically and emotionally unsustainable to bear the weight of the ever-present pain and trauma of the ER. At first, the guilt of leaving such an essential profession overwhelmed me. But I realized I could make as much or more of a difference by filling spiritual and communal needs through my volunteer work in the Jewish community. This fueled my desire to leave medicine and pursue a career in Jewish nonprofit spaces.

I was moving so quickly that it took a while for me to realize that I experience the same "otherness" I live through every day as a Black queer woman. My Jewish identity is questioned in a way my white Jew by Choice friends' identity isn't because my skin color makes me easier to spot. I'm asked about what kind of conversion I went through to see if I am a "legit" Jew. I'm asked if I'm lost at synagogues. I frequently find myself in the dreaded "the Holocaust was worse than slavery" debates. And it hurts.

It feels like the community I was so excited to join is not as excited to have me.

Shutting down and disengaging was not an option. I participated in a JOC (Jews of Color) career development program from Upstart and was paired with Yavilah McCoy, the CEO and executive director of the diversity and inclusion nonprofit DIMENSIONS, Inc., as my mentor. That experience solidified my career switch to the Jewish community. I founded a program at Moishe House called JOC Joy for the residents, hosts, and staff who identify as Jews of Color to have a place away from the white-dominated spaces we occupy.

I am far from done. Every time one of us pushes for more diversity, more equity, and more openness, our table gets a little longer, and the path is made that much easier for the Jews of Color who will come after me.

Creating a more welcoming and loving community must include how we raise Jewish children. We need to learn how to talk about racism in the Jewish community and break the stereotype of what appearances we consider "Jewish enough." I'm so grateful for the chance to work with PJ Library. At my programs, children don't only listen to stories and make crafts. They see exactly what Judaism looks like. It looks like me. It looks like all of us.