

## RABBI'S MESSAGE

### *Diversity and Unity*

The most recent Bar Mitzvah at Temple Beth Torah reminded me of the beautiful diversity within the Jewish people. Omri has an American born Black Jewish mother and an Israeli born Black Jewish father. Omri's grandfather moved to Israel as a young man and is the religious leader of a Jewish community in Israel. Those who attended the Bar Mitzvah were treated to one of the most inspiring singing voices imaginable. In 2026, we will celebrate the Bar Mitzvah of a student whose mother was born in China and father in the Ukraine; as well as the Bat Mitzvah of a student whose mother was born in the Ukraine and father was born in Kingwood. These two 2026 Bar and Bat Mitzvahs are both the second children in their families to have their celebrations at Temple Beth Torah. We have also had several Bar and Bat Mitzvahs with Hispanic students, from both Mexican and El Salvadorian families.

"Jews of Color" are not unique to Temple Beth Torah, nor is this a new phenomenon; it's just a new term. It is believed to have been introduced in 2001 by educator, researcher, and activist Shahanna McKinney-Baldon as "a reminder for some that there are Jews who are Black, Latino/a, Asian, and/or Native." Truly, since the beginning of Judaism, we have been a multi-ethnic group. It is why the term "the Jewish race" is inaccurate. Jewish people exist all over the world. A recent study reflects that 12-15% of all Jewish people in America identify as Jews of Color. The term itself has some controversy, because some might expect that it reflects a socio-political ideology. But as we've learned dramatically in recent years, Jewish people can differ quite significantly in political opinions, as well as economic status. These differences may contradict stereotypes that we have for ourselves, and others have for us.

One of the most influential rabbis of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, senior rabbi of Central Synagogue in Manhattan. Rabbi Buchdahl was born in South Korea to a Korean Buddhist mother and a white Jewish father. She is the first Asian born rabbi in the U.S. after she became the first Asian born *cantor* in the U.S., and leads one of the largest Reform synagogues in the world. She recently published a book, *The Heart of a Stranger: an Unlikely Rabbi's Story of Faith, Identity and Belonging*. Rabbi Buchdahl talks about growing up as an Asian Jewish teenager, her difficulties being accepted by the Jewish world, and her ascent to Jewish leadership. She reminds us that the most oft-repeated commandment in the Torah is "*Treat the stranger as one of your own, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*"

The tapestry of Judaism includes both religious worship and cultural connections. Despite seemingly never-ending antisemitism, there has been a recent influx of people choosing to convert to Judaism. This is not scientific, just something that my rabbinic colleagues and I have noticed. The unique blend of Jewish people with vastly different backgrounds enhances our community. Our most sacred teaching, *Shema Yisrael* acknowledges God's one-ness; the only unique holiness that can touch all human beings in singular, distinctive ways. Every person is different, and one God unites us.

L'shalom,

*Rabbi Dan Gordon*