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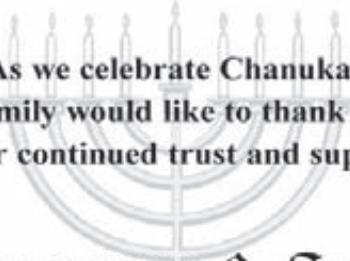
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Jamaican Jew doesn't fit the usual stereotypes

Paul Lungen
Staff Reporter

When Rivka Campbell was still in high school, she started to become curious about her Jewish heritage. It wasn't something that often came up in her day-to-day life. Her family wasn't particularly observant, but she knew she was Jewish on her mother's side, going all the way back to the Sephardi expulsion from Spain 500 years ago.

At 18, she considered visiting Israel as part of her process of self-exploration; she had already visited her parents' homeland, Jamaica, on numerous occasions.

But, as the old saying goes, life is what happens while you're busy making other plans. In her early 20s she married and had two children.

"It was not until my marriage broke apart that I had to find out more about who I was, as a Jew, to find out what it was to be a Jew," she said.

"I also felt I owed it to [my children] to tell them the whole family history."

It would take a couple of decades before Campbell would make the trip to Israel, but in the interim she did re-discover her roots and she began to live a more actively Jewish lifestyle. She enrolled her children in Jewish school. She attended synagogue regularly, she became a passionate advocate for Israel and the Jewish people and, in her explorations of her multifaceted identity, she found many others who don't fit any stereotype of what a Jew should look like.

It turns out, there are lots of people like Campbell, Jews of many colours and backgrounds, who are claiming their place among the Jewish people – and some who are wannabes.

After attending a lecture by a self-proclaimed "black Hebrew" from Chicago, she discovered the group wasn't what it appeared and that its Facebook page was misleading.

"I call it the 'black and treif group.' They were missionaries, Hebrew Israelites. They were trying to convert Jews. Oy, oy, oy, I got so sick of it."

Instead of merely complaining, Campbell started her own Facebook group called "A Minority Within a Minority – Jews of Colour."

"It's open to Jews of colour and also to people who have Jews of colour in their family, and people who are interested."

With about 300 members, "it's really active," she said.

The site includes many posts on Torah study, Israel and on Jews who don't necessarily resemble Ashkenazim.

Articles recently posted on the site included a fascinating look at the Lemba of South Africa, the Abayudaya in Uganda and the more familiar Jews of Ethiopia.

There's a link to a photo essay featuring Jews who do not fit any stereotypical mold; there's a section on "Debating Judaism;" another about Israel; and there's one called, "Black and Jewish – Jews of color."

It's a rainbow coalition of the People of the Book.

Campbell's interest in Torah studies was cemented during her one year in Israel, which she managed to visit a couple of decades after she'd envisioned it.

While living in Arad, she attended Chabad "shiurim" and "I enjoyed it a lot."

Not only were the lessons themselves fulfilling, but she said she gets the fewest questions from religious Jews. "They must figure I belong there, or why would I be there."

In Toronto, when she attended services at a large Conservative shul, she experienced something quite different. Once on Kol Nidre eve, she felt "a tap on the shoulder." A woman sitting behind her "asked where I'm from, if I was Ethiopian and do I come here often. I pretty much said to her I come here on a regular basis. I almost said if you came here on a regular basis you'd know that too."

Campbell admits the incident made her feel uncomfortable. "The assumption in that question is 'you don't belong, so why are you here?' It's not a welcoming question."

"I have black, brown Jewish friends who would be put off if they hear that question."

"It's not easy to fit into the Toronto Jewish community when you look different," she added.

Campbell – "it's spelled like the soup," she said – has found that humour can deflect some of the more irritating questions posed to people like herself. When she's asked if she converted, her reply might be, "No, I'm still Jewish."

Another that she's adopted from a video-maker in New York answers the question, "How are you Jewish?" with the quip, "I'm fine, thank you. How are you, Jewish?"

"It's a question that Ashkenazi Jews don't get," she said.

Campbell is now working on a



Rivka Campbell

video to highlight the diversity of the Jewish people.

"The purpose of my video work is not to bitch and moan. It is to say, this is our reality. We are different. That's one of the beautiful things about being Jewish."

"Given that we as a people are scattered throughout the world, why is it unusual to find people with brown hair, dark curls, Asian [looking]?"

In the broader community, she's rarely asked about being black and Jewish. Instead, the questions she gets are about the religion itself. She was often the go-to person for answers on things Jewish when she worked as a nurse at North York General Hospital.

Living a Jewish lifestyle is something she strives for constantly, while returning to Israel remains high on her list of priorities.

Based on her experience there, she's often pushed back against the charge of Israel as an apartheid state. She's been barred from some Facebook pages because of her persistence. The irony is that "I can go anywhere in Israel except in Hebron, where a sign is posted [in the casbah], 'Jews are not allowed,'" she said.

"I get asked to defend Israel against the charges of apartheid... I will never say it's a racist country. I will tell you there's a lot of work that needs to be done."

One is an attitude that she believes was imported from the Diaspora, "that tends to rank Jews. That needs to be addressed."

"Progress will be shown. We're Jews. There shouldn't be ranking among Jews," she said.

As to her home in Toronto, Campbell wants others to remember, "we're Jews too. I think that's what I want people to understand."

"We all have a story."