

Our True Colors

Coming face-to-face with racism in the Jewish community

By [Marra B. Gad](#)



In April 1970 I was adopted as a 3-day-old infant by a white Jewish couple from Chicago. My biological mother was unwed, white, and Jewish; my biological father was black. For my new parents, it was love at first sight, despite not knowing at that moment what the world had in store for them and me. Growing up, I was told I was not “black enough” in black spaces; in Jewish spaces, I was often mistaken for the help, asked to leave, and worse. Eventually, my parents had two biological children and together, our nuclear family drove away the racism that not only came from the outside, but also from within our extended family, which is something that I wrote about in my recently published memoir.

As a part of my book tour, I was invited to speak at the Union for Reform Judaism Biennial Conference in my hometown of Chicago. As a longtime member of the Reform movement, I considered the invitation a great honor and gladly accepted, knowing that I’d be going home. Literally and figuratively.

Being raised in Chicago in the 1970s was an adventure for everyone in my city. Chicago is a deeply segregated city to this day, and our neighborhood was almost exclusively white. My brown face stuck out so much that people would often stop my parents on the street to ask if I “was theirs.” At our synagogue it was certainly no different. Mine was the lone brown face in a

sea of Ashkenazi faces for years. But in spite of the twisted spotlight clearly on me, I grew up as engaged as a Jewish child could be.

I was president of the synagogue youth group. Vice president of the Chicago Federation of Temple Youth. President of my confirmation class. I was a camper and on staff at OSRUI, the URJ's camp in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. But that did not stop the whispering. The rumors. The disdainful question of "what I was" asked so constantly that it led to rumors so painful that they still sting when I recount them. Perhaps the worst was that my mother had been raped by a black man, and that's why I "look this way." I heard that rumor for the first time at religious school on a Sunday morning when I was 7 years old. And it remains with me to this day.

Everywhere I went, I remained conspicuously brown. But I was as "in" as an outsider could be, and I did my best to ignore the whispers about my Afro, and the fact that no one would dance with me at bar and bat mitzvah parties, and I threw myself into being the ultimate Reform Jewish overachiever—right down to considering both rabbinial and cantorial school toward the end of college.

If in the 1970s and '80s people talked about my family and me behind our backs—although often loudly enough for us to hear them—in my adult years people have become directly confrontational in their racism and ignorance. That has only increased with the advent of filterless social media posting and in our current climate, where people seem to feel free to say absolutely anything that is on their minds at all times.

Even in very liberal Los Angeles, where I now live, I have had a series of horrific experiences, most often when I try to attend synagogue. Many assume that people are so "liberal" in L.A. that I would not have a problem. But each time that I have ventured into a Jewish space in L.A., including on Rosh Hashanah morning this past year, I have been treated like an alien—right down to being told to my face that I am viewed as a threat at this time of increased and violent anti-Semitism because people don't know me. When I point out that 99% of the time, those who violently attack synagogues are white men, and then ask why I, as a biracial woman, would be viewed in the same light, I am met with silence. Because the racist answer is one that no one wants to volunteer.

With all of that said, in the last few years the Reform movement has been at the forefront of talking about the need to make sure that we are both behaving in the most welcoming way to everyone who spends time in the community, and in speaking openly about racism. And so, I truly believed that, as an honored guest at the Biennial, whose photograph was featured prominently on the event homepage, I would not have to worry. I believed that, this time it would be different.

But, from moment one, things did not go as any of us had hoped they would.

When I went to pick up my credentials at the conference hotel, I was told that the "real" Marra Gad needed to pick up her badge. And when I replied that I was the real Marra Gad, I did not receive an apology. Instead, the person behind the desk said, "Really!?"

I was eventually given my very bright orange badge that clearly said PRESENTER across the bottom but that did nothing to prevent the avalanche of racist, intolerant, ignorant behavior that followed.

I was assumed to be hotel staff. Twice. While wearing my bright orange badge. And told that I needed to do more to get room service orders out faster.

I was repeatedly and incredulously asked, “What are you doing here!?” And when I replied that I was a featured speaker on Shabbat afternoon, I was then asked what I could possibly have to speak about.

I ended up in an elevator filled with attendees who whispered about me like I wasn’t there. What was I doing there? And, again, what could I possibly be presenting about?

And one of the main themes for the Biennial was about diversity, and how important it was to expand our tent to include everyone.

Stared at. Confronted. Whispered about. And assumed to work for the hotel. It all grew so uncomfortable for me to be out with the general population that I had to be escorted from place to place by URJ staff, who saw for themselves the looks that I received simply being in the hallways. When others were at Friday evening services, dinner, or a song session, I was in my hotel room alone. Crying. Because I did not feel comfortable and safe being out with my own people.

I shared these stories during my Shabbat afternoon session, and while most people asked very thoughtful questions and were empathic and supportive, as a final moment, a woman forcefully interrupted the discussion to share what she had been thinking about the entire hour. She used her time to turn everything around on me, stating clearly and without apology that I could have made it all better for myself had I chosen to confront the people in the elevator and explain myself. Create comfort for them. I should have made it a “teachable moment” and taught them that I was Jewish.

In the days that followed, I received hundreds of messages from well-intentioned people asking if rest had helped to “put it behind me.” And whether the many messages I received “erased what happened.” I also received notes saying that I should heal “quickly” so that I can “move on” because there is work to do.

I received private emails saying that the woman who believed that it was my job to have done better with the horrible people who I encountered was simply being ignorant. That she just “didn’t understand” and that I shouldn’t be so outraged.

And all of this further upset me. A lot. To spend time swimming in this level of racism, intolerance, and aggression was traumatic for me. For my family, who attended my session, to see me get attacked in the room was horrifying. And it felt like people just didn’t understand how tremendously painful all of this really was.

And then, two of my trusted friends who are rabbis and with whom I was discussing all of this suggested that most people really don't understand what the experiences at Biennial felt like for me. Because they cannot. Because it would not happen to them. Because they are white. And I am not. And for a moment, that made sense.

But, as I continue to consider the question, I would offer that Jews should absolutely understand because of what it feels like to be on the receiving end of anti-Semitism.

Racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, anti-other-isms are all abuses of the soul. And to be on the receiving end of it is a trauma. One that Jews, and so many others, know very well.

Jews know what it feels like to be stared at. Whispered about. Not made to feel welcome. To feel unsafe.

If someone aggressively says that we Jews can do better in the face of anti-Semitism and puts it back on us—which, as we know, happens—we are outraged. We don't chalk it up to them not understanding and let that soften the experience for us.

We do not “move on” and put anti-Semitism behind us. Ever. Nor should we with racism.

While the many supportive messages that are received after anti-Semitic attacks are wonderful, they do not erase the incidents because nothing can or will. It works the same way with racism.

While I will heal, the events of Biennial have been added to the already large canon of stories that I carry as a part of my human experience. They will never go away. And I carry tales of anti-Semitism and racism in my personal library every day.

Two weeks after the Biennial, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the URJ, posted a public statement on Facebook, in which he said he was “deeply sorry for each painful encounter” I had in Chicago, and urged Reform Jews to “commit to anti-racism and other active forms of fighting oppression.” He continued: “We must all acknowledge that racism isn't only ‘out there somewhere.’ Racism lives as well in our Jewish communities, and it lives in each of us. We can't work to dismantle structures of racism in our society until we acknowledge that. The change we are tackling requires our commitment to go very deep at the very moment when hate, bigotry, and racism are being fomented all around us. This change we desperately need will not happen quickly but what's at stake is our integrity as a Jewish community.”

I believe that a big part of finding the solution to any problem lies first in fully acknowledging that the problem exists, and Rabbi Jacobs' statement was terribly important because he did just that. And he did so publicly. That he also apologized was another very important moment for me and for every other person who has experienced the things that I did at the Biennial, because it is something that almost never happens. We who are marginalized do not receive acknowledgements. We do not receive apologies. And that, too, is a big part of perpetuating the pain and lifespan of racism in our community.

While this took place at a Jewish event, it could have happened anywhere. It is happening everywhere. I am one person and this is my story, and it is told through my lens of being biracial and Jewish, but there are many other decidedly similar stories just like mine out in the world. And that should unite us.

After posting about my Biennial experience on Facebook, I received dozens of phone calls and emails from friends and strangers alike sharing their stories of the trauma of being other-ed in the world today. For being LGBTQ. For being an immigrant. For being Muslim. For being a refugee. For their uniquely-abledness. Certainly for being of color.

I said in the room that, while we clearly have a profound intolerance problem both in the Jewish community and in the world at large, the discussion is about far more than people of color and how we are treated. It is about all of us and how we treat one another. The Torah teaches us that we are all created *B'Tzelem Elohim*—in the image of God, which speaks to the sacredness in one another simply because we are human and we are here. But we are clearly not treating one another as if that is something that we hold as true.

It should not be hard for any of us deemed “other” in today’s world to put ourselves in another’s shoes, for our stories all have the same resilient heartbeat. We are, in my mind, one community. Not other. And truly, the majority.

And if each of us individually takes a moment to see how very alike we are and how easily we can show empathy to our community at large because our stories are so very much the same, we will create a wave of civility that celebrates the humanity in us all. A wave that cannot be stopped by the few who simply don’t get it. If I could choose one good thing to happen because of the conversation that we have been having in the aftermath of my Biennial experience it would be this.

Marra B. Gad is a film and television producer, and the author of *The Color of Love: A Story of a Mixed-Race Jewish Girl*.