

Who Do You Think You Are?

Kendell Pinkney, Student, The Rabbinical School, JTS (Class of 2022)



When I received the results, I can't say I was all that surprised:

67% Sub-Saharan African, 30% Northwest European, 2% Indigenous American, 1% unaccounted for.

I already knew that my ethnic heritage was decently mixed up. I had spent enough years peppering my grandmothers with the kinds of questions only a child feels comfortable pursuing: "Where was your mother from? Where was your father from? Belize?! Which city? Dangriga? Sounds weird. Never heard of it. Wait, grandma, *your* grandmother was a white woman from Louisiana?!"

But there was something intriguing about *seeing* my genetic make-up. Witnessing my genes splattered in Pollock-esque hues across a map of the world gave me an unexpected, concrete sense of belonging. It pointed toward lands and collective memories that preceded the stories of my grandmothers.

It is common to be interested in one's roots. In fact, it has become cliché. All one has to do is take a quick look at the ever expanding commercial landscape of genealogy kits and the proliferation of prestige media to know that identity and personal origins are big business. And I get it; of course we want to uncover the stories of our origins! These stories help us make sense of our world. In fact, as a theatre maker and (almost) rabbi, I spend most of my time outside of JTS creating narratives that test and tug on the knotty intersections of identity, race, religion, and text. But within this understandable impulse to know our roots, there is also the potential for danger. After all, we humans are storytelling animals, and as such, we can succumb to the temptation of creating false lineages and mobilizing them for less than

optimal purposes. This week's parashah contains an infamous example of that.

In Parashat Noah, we read the epic story of a family who survives a world-ending flood with a menagerie of animals aboard a vast, floating ark. As a kid, I was drawn to this story. Maybe it was that I imagined being stuck on a cruise with lemurs, dogs, giraffes, and chinchillas wouldn't be so bad. An only child can dream, right?! During adolescence, however, I became aware of a seemingly innocuous little pericope within this saga that had been used for egregiously oppressive purposes. In Genesis 9, the story goes that Ham, one of Noah's sons, happened upon a drunk Noah and saw *עֶרְוַת אָבִיו* (his father's nakedness). As a result of this transgression, Noah cursed Ham's son, Canaan, to be a slave to his brothers. These few lines of text were eventually built into a robust pseudo-scientific, pseudo-historical theory called "The Curse of Ham," which posited that Africans were the descendants of Ham, and thus worthy of being enslaved. This idea of African descent from Ham proved so resilient that even long after the end of slavery and Jim Crow, I encountered a faint whiff of this "origin story" in the Black churches and racially mixed Southern communities I grew up in.

As any student who has taken a JTS history class can tell you, there is no greater sin one can commit than the sin of presentism—the process of uncritically interpreting the past through the cultural contexts and assumptions of the present day. What slave owners and a fair amount of their contemporaries did was just that—they read themselves and their contemporary realities into the text. From there, they made the mental leap that connected Ham and his descendants with slavery and Black Africans—an idea that is

nowhere present in the biblical text. This “leap” didn’t arise in the antebellum South, however. As noted historian David M. Goldenberg writes in his meticulously detailed reception history of this text, *Black and Slave: The Origins and History of the Curse of Ham*, the history of viewing Black people as those cursed to be slaves winds its way back through Christian Europe and even into some etiological myths of Black enslavement in Islam. This myth can also be found amongst certain Jews starting in the medieval era. Most notably, the commentator ibn Ezra subtly pushes back against this ideology using the genealogies of the Tanakh.

But my purpose here is not to blame Jews, Christians, or Muslims of any specific era for the rise of anti-Blackness; history is far too complex to paint past realities with such a broad brush. Rather, my intent is to highlight that in our yearning to know our origins and shore up our group identities, our cultural memories can become highly impressionable. And left unchecked, this can lead us to read our worst impulses into our sacred texts and justify unethical abuses that can be as destructive as the mythic deluge of Noah’s generation.

As real as this concern may be, I also do not think that it need be a self-fulfilling prophecy. As with many warnings and challenges, if we approach them from a different vantage point, we may also find opportunities. I don’t mean to be a Pollyanna, implying that within every hardship is a silver lining; some realities are too hard to rehabilitate with a “paradigm shift.” What I *am* saying, however, is that it takes a clear-eyed pragmatism to see life as it is and then choose to perform a feat of creative daring and construct what could be. From my perspective as an artist and theatre-maker, I believe that bringing a critical awareness of ourselves to the projects of history, Jewish tradition, and collective memory can unleash unexpected creative possibilities.

This year at JTS (in partnership with The Hendel Center for Justice and Ethics at JTS, [Reboot](#), [Usdan](#), and [JCC Harlem](#)) I’m privileged to be collaborating with seven amazing artists to launch “[The Workshop](#)”—North America’s first arts fellowship centering the work of JOCISM (Jews of Color, Indigenous Jews, Sephardi, and Mizrahi) artists and culture-

makers. As Jews of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds who are deeply interested in matters of identity and origins, we will spend a year studying ancient Jewish texts around the theme of collective memory. We will ask of both the texts of our heritage and of ourselves, “What does it mean to remember? How is that memory recorded? How, if at all, does what we, or a text “remembers” align with historical events? How does remembering shape our sense of identity? And most consequentially, who has the power to create or destroy memory?” From our study, we will generate new works of art that will wrestle with these questions in ways that are sometimes bold, sometimes subversive, occasionally unexpected, often entertaining, and always nuanced.

My hope is that by engaging Jewish text both with other JOCISM folks and in conversation with the New York Jewish community, our artists will craft tales, dances, pictures, songs, theatre, and other visions that are as constructive for *k'lal Yisrael* as they are challenging. Such art is good for the Jews. What is more, it is good for humanity. And maybe through the transforming power of creative imagination and Jewish community we will be able to perform some small tikkun — deconstructing and repairing those longstanding narratives that have saddled us with curses that no longer serve us.