

Ezina LeBlanc, A Little Brown Jewess



Ezina LeBlanc | ג' באייר ה'תשע"ח (April 18, 2018)

Every morning, my Papa would get up and strap this little box to his arms and head while praying. His prayers would often wake me from a deep sleep and, in the darkness of the morning, I would tip toe and hide behind a chair and watch him rock back and forth as he prayed.

At the time, I didn't understand the purpose of his little black boxes with straps called Tefillin, but when Papa was deep in prayer, I knew not to interfere. He would finish his prayers, get dressed, and join my grandma for breakfast.

The Tefillin was my favorite thing to sneak and touch when Papa wasn't looking. I would take any opportunity to sneak into his room and get a closer look. Once he caught me holding them and reciting the prayer. He said, "Tefillin is for boys. You are not obligated to do this."

In our Temple, women sat on one side and the men on the other. As children, we were sent to a children's area where we were taught prayers and played games designed to teach us about Judaism. I was always sneaking off to see what the adults were doing, as that seemed far more interesting than what we kids were up to.

One sunny Shabbat morning in shul, I learned that I was different. I was trying to sneak into the adult service with a couple of friends when I was spotted by one of the older men in the Temple. He saw us and said, "Come here, you, the little brown one, come here." He was talking to me. I had never noticed before, but I was the brown one. In that moment realized that my skin was darker than everyone else in the Temple. I was ushered back to the kids area and I couldn't stop staring at my hands. I was brown. I was different than every other kid in the room.

I became engrossed in learning the Torah. I recited my prayers with perfection. I studied Torah dutifully, looking for descriptions of the people mentioned in it. Skin like amber, hair like wool. That described me. I kept reading and reading and never did I see anything about someone who didn't sound like me. I kept learning and chanting.

When I eventually mentioned it to my Papa, he said the original Jews were brown. He said all you need to do is focus on Tikkun Olam (repairing the world). If you focus on Tikkun Olam, you will receive God's grace. What other people think of you doesn't matter. All that matters is what you think of yourself and how you treat people. If you treat people with loving kindness, God will open up his blessings to you.

Growing up in the 80's, my practice became stronger. I rose each day with Modeh Ani and Elohai Neshama, and retired each night with the Shema and Hashkivenu. I kept track of when I wasn't nice and made sure that I threw the appropriate number of bread pieces in the lake during Tashlich each year.

I was always on the lookout for other little brown Jews. When I would meet a new, non-brown Jew, they would say, "Oh, you are like Sammy Davis Jr." "No, I was born this way," I would declare. "No, you can't be. Jews are white." I would get into debates about the descriptions in the Torah of what people looked

like. I would argue but I was always outnumbered. As the years continued, the Sammy Davis reference continued.

I moved to Chicago, Illinois and finally found hundreds of brown Jews. Then I moved to New York City and found even more brown Jews. We all had the same experience of the Sammy Davis reference. People were suspicious when we spoke in Hebrew.

In the 80s, I was old enough to go to Israel with Birthright. I was so excited. When I arrived, I could feel the holiness of the land we were standing upon. The wailing wall took my breath away. You could feel the heartbeat of all the souls who had come before us.

Sleeping in tents near the beach and seeing a real camel could not compare to the joy of seeing all of the brown Jews everywhere. Some were Israeli, some were Ethiopian. Some were Moroccan and a few were American, just like me. This reinvigorated my Torah studies and my dedication to Tikkun Olam.

As a traveling musician, no matter where I am in the world, I visit Jewish Temples. Even though I am met with doubt and suspicion at every new Temple I visit, I recite the Shema with love, joy, and gratitude. Shema Israel Adonai Eloheynnu, Adonai Echad. Amen.



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Ezina is an entrepreneur, musician, yogi, and author from Los Angeles. Ezina is also a humanitarian and is heavily involved with her community, particularly with the Jewish Federation. Within the Jewish Federation, Ezina is a former member of women's philanthropy, a member of the Young Leadership Division and was chair of the Young Leadership Division "Ignite" event in 2014.

