Two Peoples: A Search for Identity

Monica Rodriguez

My last name is Rodriguez, which usually begs the question: "How did a Jewish girl like you get such a typical Hispanic last name?" I might answer innocently that there are plenty of Jews with Hispanic-sounding last names. Or, if I'm feeling particularly talkative, I'll tell them a story.

It all started several years ago when I found myself drawn to a faith not of my ancestors. My strong Puerto Rican upbringing came with the very American belief that I could choose to be anything I wanted to be in life — president, astronaut, Jewish. Though neither NASA nor the White House was in my future, I found my calling in Judaism. The more I studied and participated in Jewish life, the more I felt like there was no religion more aligned with my *kishkes*. Your God will be my God. Your land will be my land. Your people will be my people.

But I already had a people. And I liked that people. The tastes, sounds, and embrace of my Hispanic heritage were in my blood. I had no problem giving up ham and Christmas, but what place did salsa dancing and *telenovelas* have in my Jewish life? As much as I loved cholent, Yiddishkeit, and Judaism's rich history, I was unsure how my new Jewish identity would blend with my existing Hispanic one. The more I studied Torah and delved into Judaism, the more I felt as if my Hispanicness was in danger of being overshadowed by the totality of living a Jewish life.

One rabbi vainly tried to comfort me by telling me that I spiritually built for myself a large Jewish house. In that house was a Hispanic room that I could sit in sometimes — like a guest room. But I didn't want to just *visit* my Hispanicness, I wanted to live it, in an authentically Jewish way. I wanted to have two peoples to whom I was irrevocably tied. I felt a

deep need for the two sides of my identity to become one whole, influencing and enriching each other.

My answer came in the form of a CD, buried in the clearance rack at my local music store. What I thought was a recording of basic Brazilian music turned out to be a Sephardic Jewish woman singing traditional Ladino ballads and liturgical melodies. "Abraham avinu, padre querido, padre bendicho, luz de Yisrael." I found myself understanding some of the Ladino, which I later found out was a medieval form of Spanish combined with Hebrew. Her words, her voice, and the beautiful melodies brought tears to my eyes and introduced me to the Sephardic experience that I had barely heard about my studies. Like a sponge, I read everything I could on Sephardic Jews and attended several Sephardic religious services. Emboldened by their authentic Jewish voice, I finally felt confident I could combine my Hispanic soul with my Jewish life.

Today on my table, one finds rice and beans alongside the latkes. I've become deeply passionate about the tremendous diversity of Jewish experience, the whole of the Diaspora — its customs, scents, and sounds from Ethiopia, Italy, Poland, Yemen, Mexico, and beyond. I try to weave a multitude of experiences into the mainstream Jewish community. I also share a strong sensitivity with other multiracial Jews who are struggling to mesh their Judaism with their identities as Japanese, Chinese, Korean, or African Americans.

Hopefully, one day a more inclusive Judaism will welcome my children as part of the mosaic of *klal Yisrael* — as Hispanic-Jews with two identities; identities on each side of the hyphen.



Yisrael Campbell,

awareness of Jewish

diversity.

an Orthodox standup comedian in Israel, tells his story of conversion in a one-man play "You Can Never Be Too Jewish" and "Circumcise Me," a documentary film on his life. yisraelcampbell.com

November 2008 Kislev 5769 To subscribe: 877-568-SHMA www.shma.com

More Beloved by Gd:

A documentary exploration of conversion, converts, and what the newest Jews bring to the Jewish people.

With the simple question, "Why would anyone choose to become a Jew?" I began a documentary film project, "More Beloved by Gd," where you'll meet an Italian, Catholic-born rabbi from Sicily, an African American hip-hop artist from East Baltimore, and a former ballerina. Visit shma.com to view the film's trailer. —Laura Wiessen

