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Praxis Project

Identity and Positionality

Identity and Positionality:

Stepping Away and Outside of the Box:

Growing up, I was surrounded by privilege. My town, which is dominated by white, affluent, Jewish families, served as a bubble for the first eighteen years of my life, and throughout those years I was immersed in an atmosphere that I often refer to as “sameness.” When I invoke this term, I use it to describe how so many of the people I knew talked the same, looked the same, acted the same, and identified the same as I did and as a white, Jewish woman growing up in a wealthy neighborhood I held and still do hold and an incredible amount of privilege. When thinking back on my identity, I spent the majority of my adolescence resenting the Jewish culture and values that I had been surrounded with. My mother is Jewish and while my father is as well, he identifies more as an atheist. The “sameness” I experienced within my town extended to religion as well. Most of my peers attended the same Temple as I did and were members of Jewish youth groups my mother always pushed me to join. I couldn’t sit still in services and despised doing anything that involved praying, and often, I was pestered by my family to attend long events I had no interest in going to. Moreover, I had internalized this narrative that there was only “one” way to be Jewish because it always felt as if I was expected by both my parents and my community to fit into their box of what it meant to be a member of the Jewish community.

This box continued to feel smaller and smaller until I was sixteen and had the opportunity to travel to Poland and Israel for a summer with a group of thirty other teenagers my age. We all entered this trip with different understandings of what it meant to be Jewish and while many of us identified similarly to one another, our values and understanding of Judaism each differed. It is important to note that this trip was only made possible due to the class privilege my family holds and marked the first time I had traveled without my parents. Throughout our time abroad, we traveled to a new city every three days, visited as many museums as we could, and explored through trying new foods and chatting with street vendors.

During this time, I had the opportunity to meet a multitude of people who each embraced Judaism in their own way. I remember sitting in an incredibly beige conference room in the basement of our current hostel in Jerusalem. Our tour guide had invited a group speaker to come and instigate a discussion about which part of Judaism we identified with the most. While seemingly simple, this question took me off guard, and forced me to ask myself what part of my Jewish identity did I value the most? Many of my peers began talking about religion and their belief in God, some mentioned food, and others remained silent like me.

As I sat uncomfortably in my seat, I finally raised my hand and asked, “What about values just in general? Can we talk about that?” From then on, our group got into a lively discussion about what exactly are some Jewish values and if they are values that we identify with ourselves. We talked about core values such as *Chesed* which means to treat others with loving and kindness and *Lo Ta'amod* which means to not stand idly by when we witness injustice. However, we also spoke about a salient concept for many Jews which is to question everything. Judaism is often referred to as a religion of questions as we are taught to always ask. For

example, on Passover, a more commonly known holiday where we celebrate the Jews being freed from slavery in Egypt, there is a tradition in the seder where we ask the four questions. Those questions can be seen below in the table along with translations as well:

English	Transliteration	Hebrew
Why is this night different from all the other nights?;	Mah nishtanah, ha-laylah ha-zeh, mi-kol ha-leylot	מה נשתנה, הלילה הזה מכל הלילות
That in all other nights we do not dip vegetables even once, on this night, we dip twice?	She-b'khol ha-leylot 'anu matbilin 'afilu pa'am 'achat, ha-laylah ha-zeh, shtey p'amim	שבכל הלילות אין אנו מטבילין אפילו פעם אחת הלילה הזה, שתי פעמים
That on all other nights we eat both chametz and matzah, on this night, we eat only matzah?	She-b'khol ha-leylot 'anu 'okhlin chameytz u-matzah, ha-laylah ha-zeh, kulo matzah	שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין חמץ ומצה הלילה הזה, כלו מצה
That on all other nights we eat many vegetables, on this night, maror?	She-b'khol ha-leylot 'anu 'okhlin sh'ar y'rakot, ha-laylah ha-zeh, maror	שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין שאר ירקות הלילה הזה, מרור
That in all other nights some eat and drink sitting with others reclining, but on this night, we are all reclining?	She-b'khol ha-leylot 'anu 'okhlin ushotin beyn yoshvin u-veyn m'subin, ha-laylah ha-zeh, kulanu m'subin	שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין ושותין בין יושבין ובין מסבין הלילה הזה, כלנו מסבין

I've celebrated this holiday every year with my family and while I grew up in a reform community and we technically complete a much-shortened version of the typical seder so we can just skip to the fun part and eat, we always include these questions. It feels fitting to include a vital component of this holiday in my thesis as Passover just recently passed and it coincides with the conclusion of this semester.

With all this said: So, when I raised my hand in that horribly lit conference room, I was in part terrified because for as long as I could remember I was fed this idea that I had to fit into the mold of my community at home. Ironically, I had been taught to ask questions my entire life, just not about my identity or my community, which seems so counterintuitive to me now when I reflect back on my experience, but in this moment I also felt absolutely exhilarated because it

was the first time I was far away enough from this space where I had the opportunity to ask the questions that I had been holding in for most of my life.

I then raised my hand again and asked, “*can we still uphold these values and be Jewish without being religious?*” To which her response was a quick, “of course.” In that moment, I realized that Judaism could be whatever I wanted it to be. This experience helped me come to terms with the fact that there’s more than one way to be Jewish and I could uphold Jewish values without subscribing to the single narrative that was pushed onto me by my home environment. Without having a space where I felt comfortable to ask these questions, I may not have realized these things when I did. Unfortunately, I’m unsure as to what would have happened if I said nothing, but what I do know is that I’m grateful for this experience and without asking myself and others those questions that day, I wouldn’t be who I am today.

Moving forward, this one question helped me to reframe how I view myself, our world, and the problems that occur within our society. Prior to this experience I believed that there was only one way of “being,” whether this was shown through religion, gender, ethnicity, etc. However, I have come to understand that there are multiple different realities and multiple truths in our world. Thus, I believe that no two people’s experiences will ever be the same as we all live different lives as different people, and because of this belief, we all have varying interpretations of our experiences. This is why I have chosen to align myself with an interpretivist stance when conducting my research. I believe that it is vital to ensure that the voices of whom I am working with are centered within this work, and through taking this stance I would like to ensure that their individual voices are clearly heard and embraced.

Upon taking an interpretivist stance when conducting my praxis research, it is important that I acknowledge that I am coming from a place of an incredible amount of racial and class privilege. I feel that I began this project as an outsider and still am in many ways as my lived experiences differ greatly from those I am working with within the classroom. Because of the racial and class privilege I hold as a white woman, who grew up in an upper middle-class household, it will be vital for me to acknowledge and embrace when any implicit biases arise as I must work to unlearn what I have interpreted should be considered the standard for what is considered “engaged” within the classroom.

However, after being in Erin’s classroom for the entirety of this school year, and working with her for an even longer period than that, I feel that I have become an insider in a lot of ways as well. I have built relationships with almost every student in Erin’s class, and I have a close relationship with both Erin and her MAT student Katie. Because of this when I enter this space, I feel welcomed and comfortable navigating the classroom. The students are often excited to see me, and I am excited to see them. In addition, because I have been volunteering at Woodland Academy for almost four years now, I also feel like an insider within the school itself. Over the years, I have formed connections with other teachers in different grades and subject areas and have worked with other students as well.

Throughout my entire life, I had assumed that there was only one way to be Jewish. However, it wasn’t until I found myself in an environment where I felt that my questions and ideas were welcomed that I was able to better understand my identity as a Jewish woman in society and what that meant to me. Without asking those initial questions I’m not sure who I

would be today. Moving forward, I strive to continue questioning. Afterall, questioning helped make me who I am today.