

## Chris Harrison of Keshet talks to WJN: “God grows as we grow.”

*Chris Harrison is the communications manager at Keshet, an organization working for equality and justice for LGBTQ Jews. Prior to his current role he was a Writer/Editor at the Union for Reform Judaism and the Senior Copywriter at the digital marketing firm Ignite. He also provides consulting as a branded content writer, essayist, and script editor. Hannah Davis interviewed him for WJN about his career and his path to Judaism.*

Hannah Davis: Can you talk about your background and career path, and what brought you to Detroit?

Chris Harrison: I moved to the Detroit area in 2016. I’ve lived all over the Midwest: I was born in the Cincinnati area and went to college there, and spent about 3 years in Chicago, where I met my wife. About a year into our relationship she got a job out here and we relocated. This is also where I finished my conversion to Judaism at Temple Beth El, where I’m now a board member. I’m really glad to have them as my community.

Not long after my conversion, April Baskin at the Union for Reform Judaism reached out to me about their JewV’Nation Fellowship. It’s a fellowship that caters to different cohorts of people, but the one they were running at the time was the Jews of Color Cohort. The fellowship lasted from March until November 2018. A few months in, I was approached by the URJ about a writer-editor position. I’d done some writing for the Detroit Jewish News and I was an English major, so I have a great amount of passion for writing and communication.

I stayed with the URJ from August 2018 to March of this year. I wrote about different topics ranging from racial issues within the Jewish community ... I’m bisexual, so I talked a lot about my identity as someone who’s part of the LGBTQ community, and I also had the chance to share other people’s experiences as well, other people who are on the margins of the Jewish community, to uplift their voices and give them a platform.

HD: What was the conversion process like?

CH: The conversion process kind of started when I was eleven. I was raised Christian, but my mom told me and my older sister that we might have Jewish lineage on her side of the family. At the time I really only had a passing knowledge of what Judaism actually meant. I knew about the ancient Israelites in Bible study, and I knew that Jews today celebrated Passover and Hanukkah, but that was about it. My knowledge of Judaism basically extended to the Rugrats holiday specials, which are still very important pieces of work, I might add! Anyway, I just thought this might be a cool, additional part of my family history.

I knew I was mixed — half Black half white — but the half Jewish involved in that as well, I was like, that’s really cool. When I was in high school I looked more into it, and the more I read about what it actually meant to live as a Jew, the more deeply it resonated with me. In college, I made a really good friend who had converted to Judaism with his family. Over the summer of 2009 I went over to his house to have Shabbat dinner with his family, and it was just a really cool experience for me, especially as somebody who

had, putting it nicely, mixed experiences growing up in a Protestant Christian environment. I felt like I could actually show up to this event just as myself, and there were no expectations for me to believe anything.

When school started, we did Shabbat services at Hillel, I went to his house for Passover seders, celebrated in his sukkah, celebrated Hanukkah together. When I moved to Chicago, I put Judaism off for a little while to focus on work. But I felt



really at home doing Jewish stuff, and so I took an Intro to Judaism class at Temple Shalom on Lakeshore Drive. My wife and I moved to Detroit a few months later and I ended up finishing my conversion at Temple Beth El a year later.

HD: You said you felt you could show up to your friend’s Shabbat dinner as yourself — were you feeling tension otherwise, or an obligation to be a specific kind of way at the Protestant Christian events?

CH: Yeah, growing up I was essentially — it was something that wasn’t really a choice for me. I had to go to church every Sunday, I had to put on a shirt and tie and sit in the pew for two hours, and I was told that you had to believe this certain way to be a good person, to get into heaven. And learning that from a young age, it’s still something that sticks with me in the back of my head, that stuff doesn’t really leave you. Whereas Judaism — at least the Judaism that I experience — was more like, this is a religious civilization, and we have a fluid idea of what it means to believe in God, if you even believe. And we have these practices because they bring meaning to our lives, and there’s beauty and symbolism in them and ... I could go on, but there was definitely a contrast for me.

HD: You just started a new position at Keshet. Can you talk a little bit about the work they do, and how you got started with them?

CH: Keshet is geared toward showing up for the LGBTQ Jewish community through education, community mobilization, local

issues, things like that. They also have a dedicated blog on their site with a lot of really cool resources including Torah commentary and a directory where you can find welcoming and inclusive congregations around the country. They cater to people of all ages, but a lot of their programming is centered on youth and teens and making sure they have safe spaces where they can show up and just be themselves. It’s especially meaningful for me, given my experiences growing up. From seventh through twelfth grade I went to a

conservative Pentecostal school, and I had to be in the closet. If I had been outed [as bisexual] I could have gotten in serious trouble, I could have been suspended or expelled. It was not something I could really talk about with my immediate family at the time. They knew that I was not completely straight, but it was just very uncomfortable for them because they didn’t really know how to deal with someone like me.

So my position at Keshet is so fulfilling for me because I get to actually help be part of a positive force for children who are coming to terms with their gender identities and orientations. I know what it’s like for religion to be used in a way that’s harmful for

me, to keep me from being my full authentic self. And I want to be part of the solution helping kids have an environment, resources, and people who accept them and love them for who they are.

HD: Your intro on LinkedIn is a very powerful statement, foregrounding your various identities that you see the world through. In what ways do the identities you listed — Black, Jewish, bisexual, neurodivergent — influence your work?

CH: I think all four of those descriptors, one thing they have in common for me is they all share this idea of wanting to be accepted for who they are. That’s the Black story, the Jewish story, the queer story, the neurodiverse story. Anything that bucks against the norm, even unintentionally, even just by existing, is shunned, and is cast away, in some degree or another. I’m not saying the Black experience and the queer/Jewish/neurodiverse experiences are the exact same thing, but what they share in common is this history of pain and oppression from people who either wanted to exploit or manipulate or change them. And I feel like that comes through in my work, through a sense of resistance: this idea of, “this is who I am, I am all four of these things, and these things are not in competition with one another, they work cohesively with one another.”

I often see people try to pit the Black community and the LGBTQ community against each other, and unfortunately there is racism within the Jewish commu-

nity, and there is homophobia and transphobia within the Black community. But at the same time, there are a significant number of Black LGBTQ people, and the Jews of Color Initiative hypothesized that between 12 and 15% of Jews in America are people of color. Our liberations are intertwined. And I try to remember that through everything I do as a writer, as a person, as an advocate, as an ally, somebody who’s trying to make the world a better place through his writing.

HD: Your profile on Keshet lists Kabbalah as one of your passions. Can you talk a bit about what draws you to it?

CH: When I was converting to Judaism, I really wasn’t taught a lot about Kabbalah. It can come up in the intro classes, but it usually is like a sentence or two. At some point in Jewish history people decided to put the Jewish mysticism stuff aside, to be seen as more rational: the whole mysticism thing is going to weird people out, we want to be accepted in mainline society. And I can understand why that was a thing, but there was also a period of history where Jews could have as much knowledge of the Zohar, the foundational Kabbalistic Jewish text, as they would have of verses of the Torah.

I first got an interest in Kabbalah because I realized I was never really comfortable with the idea of a separation between God and us, because that was the mentality I was raised in. I told one of the rabbis in my Intro to Judaism class that I loved so much about Judaism, but I just couldn’t get over the “God hump,” because I’ve been jaded by religion growing up. He said, “I don’t think that God knows everything. I don’t think that God is a static figure,” and so he taught me about process theology, which is very much influenced by Jewish mysticism. It’s this idea that God learns as we learn, God grows as we grow, and that creation, capital-C Creation, wasn’t something that ended in the book of Genesis. It’s something that continues to this very day, even on a microscopic level. From cells to the cosmos, everything is in a constant state of creation and becoming.

I read a book about it by Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, called *God of Becoming and Relationship*, which I recommend to everybody. I just find a lot of personal interest, intrigue, and comfort in Kabbalah, this whole esoteric side instead of what’s on the surface — I mean the surface stuff is very important too, of course! These ideas help me to be a bit more present and understand my place in the world. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner talked about the idea that everything is God, it’s all God, even the bad stuff is God. And that was such a radical notion for me, especially as someone who grew up thinking that God brings the good stuff and the Devil brings the bad stuff. Mystical Judaism thinks, no, it’s all God. I oddly found a sense of comfort in that. Knowing that we’re all interconnected and that we’re all essentially God-sparks, even the bad stuff. There’s always something good hidden underneath. Even our evil inclinations, if you want to call them that, there’s still a spark of something behind that, that wants us to be good. ■