

DEAR COMPATRIOT, I’M OK BEING “YOU PEOPLE,” BUT I HOPE YOU CAN ONE DAY SEE ME AS “YOUR PEOPLE” TOO.

The Mexican Consul, someone I met at a local park because both our girls spoke Spanish, invited my daughter and me to a dress rehearsal of “Romeo and Juliet” along with a large group of friends of the Mexican Consulate. The performance was wonderful, and featured Isaac Hernández as Romeo, a prolific dancer from Guadalajara who learned ballet from his parents in his patio at home, along with his siblings, only to become an international performer.

At the meet and greet, we met Isaac, and heard about his personal story. But we also had a chance to meet the other guests, including a charismatic and intriguing individual whose work was so philosophical that it easily stuck out in a crowd. He was working to “change the narrative of Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and Mexicans in the United States” from 45th’s infamous condemnation of Mexicans as “rapists” and other terrible characterizations. After the group introductions, I decided to make a connection, introduce myself, hear more about his work, and share that I too am in the business of changing narratives about who we are. As a Mexican Jew working to strengthen and cultivate the Latin Jewish community, the intersectional work I do challenges both the narrative of “who Latinos are” and also “who Jews are” within both the Latin and Jewish communities.

As the executive director and founder of [Olamim](#), a Bay Area community initiative focused on Latin Jewish families, our work is to accompany these families in their multiple identities through high-quality educational programming and community-building. I shared with my new Mexican compatriot about our upcoming, [first-ever Latin Jewish festival in the Bay](#), and how our work challenges the narrative about who Latinos are, and also who Jews are – first of all, that Latinos are not a “race” but a people of many heritages, and that Jews are also a people of many heritages. I shared with him the fact that [25% of Latinos have Jewish DNA](#), and how this is rooted in the legacy of the Spanish Inquisition and the influx of Jewish exiles from Spain over five hundred years ago, which easily has led to millions of Latin descendants with Jewish ancestry. I guess I was trying my best to address his potential narrative of who Jews are.

He was excited about my work, and responded “you people” (“ustedes” in Spanish) “really helped us with our campaign in Texas” and “you people” also helped us in this other aspect, and shared that he used to lead quarterly trips to Israel and that “you people” have a great program for that which recruits Jews to make Aliyah to Israel (Birthright). I didn’t know how to feel about this “you people” way of talking about my people. I was torn between wanting to be seen as part of a people and not wanting a wide diversity of political, cultural, and religious expressions to be collapsed into “you people.”

I wondered what he might feel like if someone who was not Mexican would talk about other Mexicans as “his people” – Mexicans who he may or may not agree with. All the examples he offered were positive, and he was so well-meaning, so why was this uncomfortable for me? Was it that I didn’t want to be associated with some of “my people”?

I don’t think so. I think the “you people” bothered me because it focused on our difference, rather than our commonality. It felt somewhat alienating, though not anything that some Mexican humor could not dissipate. It did leave me thinking deeply about Olamim’s work, however, and how our potential impact is not only on our Latin Jewish families, but the broader Latin community in general. Because our programs center Spanish language and Latin identity, and we do specific outreach and relationship-building with Spanish-immersion schools and Latin communities, our work aims to offer high-quality, culturally responsive programming to the Latin community broadly.

Given the lack of this kind of programming, our approach aims toward more equitable access and is an authentic expression of solidarity, because Latinos are “our people” too. In my conversation with him, I realized how profound being a people who helps another people is. This is especially true for those who see Jewish folks as a people, and that “peoplehood” is indelibly true about us Jews (despite it being uncomfortable to be spoken to in that terminology by a person who is not Jewish).

Dear compatriot, I’m ok being “you people,” but I hope you can one day see me as “your people” too. I hope my presence, and Olamim’s work, can chip away at the anti-semitism seeded long before Mexico became an independent country in 1821 (the Spanish inquisition lasted over 250 years in Mexico). But I do not suspect or condemn you personally for that. And I equally hope that Olamim’s work can counter the racist narratives of Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and Mexicans in the United States that some Jews may harbor. Our integrity as peoples does not depend on vilifying or even essentializing any other people who are equally diverse. We’re in this together, I hope. Montagues or Capulets.

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Ariela Ronay-Jinich (she/her/ella) grew up in Mexico City, where her family is from. She has been serving Bay Area youth and families since 2005, focusing her work on innovative Jewish educational programs that center nature connection and community-building. Programs she has founded and directed include Urban Adamah’s youth and family programs, B’Hootz (Wilderness Torah), and Edah (Berkeley), and garden programs at Camp Tawonga and Gan Shalom Preschool.

