

# Invite the Whole Person: Representation vs Tokenism

Are you thinking about inviting someone who holds a historically marginalized identity to speak at your synagogue or organization's next event, panel, celebration, or another community gathering? *Kol hakavod* (all the honor, and well done) on finding yourself here!

Keep reading to ensure your effort to authentically and respectfully represent those from historically marginalized communities does not unintentionally leave the invited person or other members of their community feeling tokenized or further marginalized.

## Diving into Definitions

### Tokenism

**Tokenism** refers to the act of including a member of a historically marginalized community to signal an image of diversity within a group, rather than valuing them as a whole person outside of the identity they hold. "Token" individuals are frequently sought out for public-facing roles or appearances as part of an organization's effort to "look" diverse, without meaningful or sustained support, nor the ability to contribute meaningfully, when they are not in the spotlight. **This approach treats identity as a box to check and often positions individuals as spokespeople for an entire group.** For example: *"We're looking for someone who identifies as [insert identity] to represent that community in our [insert program, social media campaign, etc]."*

**Reminder:** Just because someone holds a particular identity does not mean they are well-suited, comfortable, or even interested in speaking or teaching about it!

Invitations like these **erase the fullness of a person's humanity by reducing them to a fraction of who they are**, often leaving the invited person feeling further unseen or marginalized because of the very identity they are being asked to represent.

### Key Signs of Tokenism

Invitations that focus too heavily on identity can feel transactional and may leave someone wondering, **"Are they inviting me, or just my identity?"** Here are some signs that an invitation may come across as tokenizing:

- The invitation focuses solely on the identity they hold, and not the skills, expertise, and knowledge they bring to the table.
- They are asked or positioned to speak on behalf of an entire identity group (i.e., one trans person speaking on behalf of all LGBTQ+ people or one Black person speaking on behalf of all People of Color).
- They are only approached during heritage or Pride months or in response to issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, with little or no engagement at other times.
- While their presence is used to signal inclusion, they are not invited into ongoing opportunities for leadership, decision-making, or offering feedback.
- They are frequently featured in promotional materials or photos, without a real relationship, collaboration, or engagement with them or their community.

## Representation

Representation is the meaningful inclusion of people in ways that honor and uplift their full humanity, skills, and story. **It values identity, but doesn't reduce someone to it.** Authentic representation is rooted in a desire to create space where people are seen not just for the identities they hold, but for the experiences, insight, and stories they carry.

**Reminder:** Representation isn't just important — it can be life-saving! Seeing people who reflect aspects of ourselves in leadership, ritual, or storytelling can make all the difference. When done with care and respect, it reminds us that we are not alone and that our stories matter.

### 5 Tips for Meaningful Invitations and Representation

- 1. Learn More Before Reaching Out:** Before anything else, take the time to know who you're inviting. If the only thing you know about someone is a demographic detail — like their race, sexual orientation, or gender identity — it's worth learning more. Conduct research to learn about their previous work, areas of expertise, and topics of interest. This helps ensure that you're capable of inviting the person, not just their identity.
- 2. Lead with Intention, Not Identity:** When extending an invitation, clearly outline the opportunity and the intentions behind it. Highlight the skills, insight, and expertise they bring that make them a strong fit, beyond just an identity they may hold. Share how their specific qualities align with the goals of the opportunity and how they can help bring those goals to life.
- 3. Make Sure the Ask Benefits Them Too:** Make sure the opportunity is designed to benefit them as well. Ensure this by asking yourself the following:
  - Will this be a meaningful or empowering opportunity for them?
  - Will they be compensated or recognized for their time and labor?
  - Do I know what they need to feel safe, supported, and fully seen — and do I have a plan for how I'll meet those needs?

If the answer is no to any of these questions, take time to explore how you can shift the opportunity to better serve and support them.

- 4. Respect Autonomy and Boundaries:** Establish early on that your priority is for them to feel safe, supported, and fully seen. Make it clear that they are under no obligation to share personal history or trauma, and that you will fully respect any boundaries they set. Give them the space and autonomy to decide if, how, and what they want to share, and check in to understand their comfort level, without adding pressure or defensiveness.
- 5. Make Space for Joy and Pride:** Recognize that individuals who hold historically marginalized identities are far more than their trauma or experiences of oppression. While it is important to make space for them to speak about harm if they choose, there should also be intentional room for — and questions that could lead to expressions of — the pride, joy, and deep sense of connection that can come from holding these identities. This helps ensure their full lived experience is represented with depth, accuracy, and respect, and that their story isn't reduced to the harm they may have faced.

As you work to build spaces rooted in true representation and belonging, remember that this work takes time, and you may not always get it right. That's okay! **What matters most is staying committed to the process.** Pirkei Avot 2:16 reminds us: *"It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it."* We may not reach perfection, but we are responsible for showing up with care, intentions, and the willingness to keep learning as we grow.