

The first time I attended a chapel service, I sat near the back with my mom. That day marked the beginning of 12 years at St. Andrew's Episcopal School. I was about six years old. When it was time to kneel for prayer, my mother pulled me back from the kneeler. I was a little disappointed. I mean how cool was it that there was a little cushion for your knees? My mother gave me a look. "We don't kneel; we're Jewish."

From that moment, I began the long process of shaping my Jewish identity and learning how to navigate religious difference. Being Jewish at St. Andrew's meant that I crossed my arms in the communion line and received a blessing instead of the wafer and wine (although Fr. Sneary did let me try a wafer once during religion class). It meant learning to sit with the awkwardness of being one of five or six others who sat instead of kneeled during prayer. I did gain an appreciation for liturgy and music that was not my own. I also got really good at talking about Chanukah, at explaining why I ate hamburgers on matzah once a year, and at writing out my friends' names in Hebrew.

I grew up feeling incredibly different, but -- the exoticism aside -- I don't remember being ashamed of my "otherness." I felt proud to share my Jewish life with my classmates. The experience allowed me to strengthen my Jewish identity while also creating in me a curiosity about faiths and cultures different from mine. No one ever tried to convert me. In fact, my years at St. Andrew's represented the first time I understood myself as an ambassador -- a role that I have since embraced.

The truth is, though, I had a pretty scattered Jewish upbringing -- I started religious school at the Conservative synagogue down the street from our house where I learned the Hebrew alphabet around the same time I was learning the English one. When my parents divorced, the differences in their level of observance became a big argument. When we were with my mother, we attended religious school regularly; my father, who didn't like the shul my mother chose, told us we didn't have to go. Finally they agreed on a Reform synagogue, and I became a Bat Mitzvah, was confirmed and traveled to Israel with my class. I loved it.

During those years, my mother also became involved in the Renewal movement and with Chabbad of San Francisco. It was the Bay Area, after all. I remember several High Holiday cycles at the Mt. Madonna Meditation Center with Reb Zalman z"l -- sitting on the floor with no shoes, eating vegan food and talking a lot about feelings. And I remember raucous Grateful Dead Shabbat celebrations at the Chabbad house

when the Dead came to town -- singing, dancing, big jugs of vodka with fresh apricots and Grateful Yid shirts for all.

I moved to New York City after spending 4 years at Smith College where I added to the mix an extensive education in Jewish lesbian feminism. Living in NYC, I was pretty confused about what kind of Jew I was. I was also a little confused about why everyone was asking that question all the time. In addition, while for the first time I didn't feel different, there seemed to be a lot of Jewish community rules that I didn't know. I worked for years at a Jewish feminist organization on the Upper West Side and was a very active lay leader at the LGBT synagogue in the Village. I remember talking a lot about wanting to fill in the holes in my Jewish education; in my mind I had this image of a big slice of swiss cheese. I remember telling my friend Or that I always felt like I was at the bottom of the hill with my Jewish learning. He would look at me and say, "it's designed that way; there is always going to be a lot more -- more than you could possibly learn in one lifetime."

Of course, he's a rabbi now... I guess I just gravitate toward those types.

Anyway, the idea of spending a lifetime working and learning **only** in the Jewish community never felt right for me. Maybe it was the experience of feeling like an "other" as a young person. Whatever it was, I have always felt more comfortable in that role of ambassador -- and so, for the past almost 20 years I have worked as a community organizer in faith communities mostly not my own.

In those spaces—public housing, Black churches, Latino immigrant prayer circles—I am a welcomed "other;" a neighboring person of faith. Building relationships across difference has become central to my understanding of what it means to be Jewish and what it means to do justice work. I always bring my Judaism with me -- wherever I am, I bring my Kosher diet, my endless questions and arguments, and an open invitation to a Shabbat dinner. But I have also been pushed to confront my whiteness and my power and my privilege. I have begun to appreciate the unique both/and role Jews can play toward racial healing in our country. I have had to learn and relearn how to confront false assumptions -- both my own and those of others. I have become much better at knowing when to keep quiet, at letting go of control and at recognizing leadership that looks very different from my own. I have learned that relationships require the give and take of tension, confrontation and forgiveness. And I have learned that I am both a student and a teacher in nearly every context.

But there's another piece too -- being with others has helped me find deeper meaning in my Jewish tradition and practice.

- I learned about talking to God, for example, while watching Black mothers sing and cry and praise in Baptist Church -- I realized they talk to God the way Hannah did in the book of Samuel.
- I dug into my own tradition's teachings about faith -- as opposed to knowledge or observance -- after praying with Catholic immigrant families until their loved ones were released from detention centers.
- Hearing church testimonies about overcoming addiction and finding personal salvation gave me a whole new understanding of the role of personal and communal narrative -- like ours at Passover -- and the ways that stories can help us to see **each other** with care and empathy.

So my understanding of what it means to be Jewish has been profoundly shaped by experiences outside the Jewish community. The Jewish home I seek to create -- while unapologetically Jewish -- is one that includes a variety of theologies, life journeys, and religious practices; it's one that takes injustice personally and sees its manifestations as both political and spiritual problems; it is a community that fosters questioning and bold action, balancing enthusiasm with humility.

And so, this year the High Holy Days mark my transition to my next logical personal and professional step: last week I started school at the Pacific School of Religion, a non-denominational Christian seminary. The one just up the road, in fact. Now you might be wondering what's a nice Jewish girl -- married to a rabbi, no less -- doing studying theology with people preparing for careers in Christian ministry? I'm being the Jew I know how to be -- bringing my understanding, hope and a lot of questions to a larger conversation about how we all work together to make the world a better place; I'm showing up as both ally and co-conspirator in the work of healing all of our communities; and, ok, I might be doing a little Hebrew tutoring for my classmates here and there...

In this new year, may we all be blessed with many opportunities to bring our beautiful, thoughtful Jewish tradition to the greater work of repairing the world.

L'Shana Tova.