

## THE PATHWAY TO DISCOVERING MY JUDAISM

S.P.

Every Passover my mom and I make chocolate-covered matzah. First, we boil the brown sugar and glaze it over the matzah, which makes the kitchen smell like the holidays. Then we melt the chocolate and spread it over the brown sugar. After the baking is finished we sit and wait for the delicious dessert to harden to make sure it tastes good. Making this dessert reminds me that I will be able to spend time with family and celebrate the amazing Passover holiday.

Judaism has been part of my life in many ways. I want to share some of these moments with you. People often say that the holidays bring out the best in people; everyone comes together, sits side by side, spends time, and creates wonderful memories with one another. If this defines a holiday, then my family has a holiday every day! I believe that my family is very close. We come together often and memories are made in this way. Throughout my whole life Judaism has been part of who I am, and I am not afraid to embrace it. I am confident in my Judaism and always willing to share my thoughts, opinions, and views through a Jewish perspective.

When my older brother was born twenty-one years ago my parents had the difficult decision whether to raise him either Jewish or Catholic since my mom is Jewish and my dad is Catholic. My family decided to follow Jewish tradition: if a mother is Jewish her children are Jewish. When I was born three years later they decided to continue the tradition and raise me Jewish. We celebrate both Jewish and Catholic holidays which connects me to both sides of the family and helps me celebrate what is important to me with my family and friends.

My first memory of Beth El was when I attended preschool. Growing older each year I was surrounded by a Jewish community and embraced my Judaism before I knew what it meant. We would sing songs and say prayers about God. I would attend temple often and as I got older, and I realized how important attending school at Beth El was for me. When I started going to religious school in kindergarten and first grade, I already knew the layout of the temple, and I also knew what kind of atmosphere and a place Beth El was. After preschool, I became a student in the Sudbury public school system but was still a member of the congregation. My family would attend services on holidays and my brother and I would go to Hebrew school every week.

During Hebrew school on Sunday mornings, the song leader, Rebecca, would visit our class and we would sing songs. My favorite song was called "The Tree of Life." The guitar would accompany us and all the students in my class would sing and dance. Looking back at it, I realize how much those moments every Sunday morning meant to me.

Years passed, and I had my Bat Mitzvah. I continued to have strong friendships with my friends from my Hebrew school class and other students at Sunday school. There was the option to continue to find new things about my Jewish identity or to stop attending religious

school every week. My best friend since preschool was in the same Torah class. The two of us talked a lot about whether we would continue to participate in Hebrew school. She was set on leaving religious school and asked why I wanted to continue. I wanted to continue in order to keep the friendships that I had formed and learn new things about my religion. After my friend decided to not attend anymore, she would bring it up at school when we were around all of my friends. I responded with the truth of why I want to be connected to God and the Beth El community.

A fraction of the reason why I continued religious school after my Bat Mitzvah was the option to participate in HiBur. Meeting teenagers just like us from Israel changed my view of Judaism. When I was younger, I thought every man in Israel had to wear a tallit every day and that every family went to temple every night. But when I met the students from Israel I realized they were just like people in America. We all had so much in common -- interests, hobbies, likes and dislikes.

When my HiBur class went to Israel we visited amazing landmarks, but the one where my Judaism spoke most to me was our trip to the Western Wall. Walking up to the wall with the other girls there was nothing but silence. I could feel the power of the wall in the air. I could sense the reverence. I could see the appreciation for the wall on the people's faces around me. Even though it was silent, I could hear people praying and becoming one with God if they chose to. I walked up to the wall and touched it, feeling the stone that was so old and seeing all the slips of paper in the cracks. Realizing how many people visit the wall every day and night made me understand that if I had to pick one place where I was most connected to my Jewish self it was the Western Wall. People wrote down their hopes and dreams, thoughts, concerns, or anything else they wanted to share with God. What I wrote on my piece of paper I wanted God to know, and I know God received it and answered.

Then the day came just a couple years ago that my family stopped being members of Beth El. It happened to be what was best for our family for personal family reasons. After my parents told me my family weren't members of the temple anymore I had mixed feelings about whether I should continue to be enrolled in the high school. My parents encouraged me to continue but let my final decision be based on what I wanted, not what they wanted for me. I knew they supported me with whatever decision I made and would help me experience Judaism in the way that I wanted.

It didn't take me long to make my decision to continue religious school, given the interest in what my Judaism will bring me. I knew that I would still be treated the same. When I did belong, Beth El had always been a huge part of my Judaism, so when I thought that I wouldn't go every week I knew that a part of me would be missing. I knew that I made the right decision when I entered the building and classes started.

After continuing Hebrew school even though my family was not a member of the congregation, I could see how experiencing Jewish ritual had changed me. Instead of going

to holiday services at Beth El, I went to temple Shir Tikvah where my grandmother is a member. The services were very different there -- not in a good way or a bad way, just different. There was no getting up and dancing, just sitting and standing for prayers. The prayers we sang sounded more like chanting instead of singing. The environment seemed quieter and more sedentary whereas Beth El seemed more spiritual and joyful. The services felt longer than they did at Beth El, and towards the end of the services I became very jittery; I just wanted to jump out of my seat and move around. I miss services at Beth El. I miss the community, the environment, and spirit. But I am blessed to still be attending religious school and having the chance for my Judaism to grow.

I feel as if I am part of two Jewish communities, and I am happier and feel more accepted. I have my family religious-based community where we celebrate holidays, make amazing foods, and have our own special traditions. In addition, I have my religious school community where I have my friends and other members of Beth El who make me feel welcome each time I walk into the building. Being able to discover new things about Judaism in both communities shows that even though I am not a member of a temple I still have my Judaism with me every day. I am still able to find new things about Judaism, and I am encouraged to follow my religious beliefs.

My Judaism is a big part of who I am. Every year I find out new things about who I am and who I want to be as a Jewish community member in my two communities: my family and Beth El.

