

The story of my Jewish journey is rather unextraordinary. The intersection of my life and Judaism embraces a time and place common for Jews in the 20th and early 21st centuries raised in and near New York City. But, sitting down and thinking about it forced me to organize my thoughts relating to my religion, where I fit in it, and where over time it has fit in me.¹

I was born in 1966 to a pair of second-generation Jews. My mom's family, mostly tailors, came from Poland, and my father's, who grew tobacco, came from Belarus via a one-generation stopover in Ukraine.² Both families arrived in the 1910s, when Jewish immigration from eastern Europe required hardly more than your personal information and where you'll be staying in America.³ My parents grew up in Manhattan and Brooklyn, respectively. Shortly after I was born, they moved from an apartment in Queens right next door to my childhood house in Valley Stream, Long Island, thereby checking that box on the American suburban dream.

Both of my parents grew up speaking Yiddish at home, and continued to use it in our household, especially when they did not want my sister or I to understand what they were saying (we started to learn anyway). Both did what they could to preserve Jewish rituals, traditions and strictures in the face of a modernizing world. We were brought up as conservative Jews. We lit candles every shabbat, we kept mostly kosher, and kosher for Passover as well.

I don't know that they believed in what they were teaching us so much as trying to preserve the "old ways" they were accustomed to. Unlike one of the other participants in the symposium, they were the generation trying to maintain these traditions, even to the point of setting us apart from nearly all of our schoolmates, while our generation was attempting to assimilate as much as possible. Still, as two of the three annual gatherings of our extended family⁴ were on Jewish holidays, maintaining the traditions meant maintaining relationships with some of my favorite people, and always a great meal.

The tension between assimilation and ethnic cohesion was never so salient as in my Hebrew School experience, which lasted from 3rd through 8th grade, for the first five years of which we went three afternoons a week from 4:30 to 6:15. I think the architect of the Temple Gates of Zion religious school classrooms had to have been a sadist, because they all faced out to the state park in which all of my gentile friends could be seen bike riding, playing frisbee, etc.

¹ These footnotes generally contain details that were skipped over in my oral presentation.

² Upon arrival in America, my paternal grandfather, whom I never met, opened an all-night cigar and candy store a block from Times Square. Apparently, my father spent many hours rolling cigars for, amongst others, notable figures in the Jewish mafia.

³ One of my maternal great-grandfathers was one of only 3 out of a family of 8 that emigrated, and by so doing survived the pre-World War II antisemitism that gripped Poland at the time. The remainder were exterminated.

⁴ Passover, Rosh Hashanah, and Thanksgiving.

Overall, our part of Long Island was maybe 15-20% Jewish, akin to the percentage of Catholics in Little Rock. We were a minority, but a large enough of one that we could seek out each other as friends, and I rarely noticed any overt discrimination. Actually, Valley Stream was on the low side of that average, but right next door to the south were the Five Towns,⁵ where Judaism may have even been in the majority at the time. Despite the less-than-ideal Hebrew School situation, I made several lifelong friends in and as a result of several Five Towners attending our Temple. I was duly Bar Mitzvahed and released from my religious school obligation.⁶

In that place and time, Conservative and Conservadox Judaism were predominant. We would see the more religious Jews, who mostly attended a private Yeshiva nearby, walking to and from Temple with their yalmukes, and usually pais. The two most common branches, along with some reform and some orthodox, would get to meet each other at the Catskills hotels (the Borcht Belt) we went to for vacation for a week or two each summer. All of that is to say I had a community in which I belonged and felt comfortable, but at the same time took some pains to avoid advertising to all my gentile friends that I was of a religious minority.

I never felt comfortable with the improbable bible stories, or with the many commandments and prohibitions placed upon the Jews. Still, I took three things from this upbringing that serve me well today.

First, the Jewish emphasis on morality. Without more, the Ten Commandments serve as a pretty complete framework for living an ethical life. I was as far from perfect of a teenager as one could be cursed with, but even when misbehaving, I knew there was an ideal that I was not living up to, and that gave me motivation and direction to do better. Second, I absorbed the culture, holidays, traditions, food, and everything else that goes with being a cultural Jew, and was inwardly proud of that. Those that grew up without pierogies, pastrami, Mandelbrot, and Halavah grew up deprived in my opinion. Third, particularly since (as noted) I am not big on mythology or the supernatural, I grew up in a world where questioning teachings and intellectually challenging doctrine was not considered blasphemous, but actively encouraged. Going further, to my mind, belonging to a religion that actively values curiosity to my mind makes it a preferred over the other western options.

My desire to assimilate reached its peak in the blueblood college I attended. As a modern young adult, I did not see much use for religion beyond ethics and culture. I went home on breaks for

⁵ The Five Towns are the adjacent towns of Hewlett (where Liz Lucker and Nancy Rousseau grew up), Woodmere (home of Seth Rudetsky, with whom I was acquainted), Cedarhurst, Lawrence (where Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart was raised) and Inwood.

⁶ My mother was a Bat Mitzvah a year beforehand, along with about 20 other adults, mostly women, who never had a Bat Mitzvah. It pained me two years after my Bar Mitzvah when much of the Temple, including part of the sanctuary and one of the Torahs, were consumed by fire set by an arsonist. It was duly rebuilt but that crime steeled my determination to perpetuate Judaism.

culture, and did not actively seek out Jewish things to do or Jewish people on campus. It was bad enough that I was to the left of most of my classmates (friend group aside); I did not need to further needlessly “stick out.”

Between college and law school, I had a night job with several of my Jewish friends tending bar in one of the resident catering halls within one of the several Conservadox Temples in the Five Towns. We waited until the Rabbi said it was okay to start, and we’d do one wedding or Bar Mitzvah on Saturday evening, and usually one or two affairs on Sunday.⁷ At law school, where there were more Jews per capita than at college or even in Valley Stream, I allowed myself some slack to reclaim my culture, including lighting Channukah candles and saying prayers with other Jews in the law library smoking section, my “second home” during finals.

I received my law degree and moved back to NYC in my mid-20s, working as a lawyer in a small-ish firm.⁸ I actively sought to reclaim some of my heritage. I joined the largest congregation in Manhattan, which was reconstructionist. I felt very comfortable with the outlook, less doctrinal than conservative Judaism, but more adherent than reform Judaism to those rituals on the rituals and culture I was raised with, and occasionally went to services to start my weekend in a better frame of mind than had I not attended.⁹

I moved to Arkansas in the late 1990s and I realized pretty much everything I had heard was actually true. The society is a little more segmented racially, more religious generally, and significantly more conservative. Most noticeably, Christians, particularly Protestants, held and continue to hold such an overwhelming majority that they dictate norms and behavior to a much greater extent than any group could in the heterogeneity of the Northeast.¹⁰ My then-intended was not Jewish, but we had an understanding that while I would never presume to ask her to convert,

⁷ This was where I had my first adulthood “you must be kidding me” moment concerning organized religion, Judaism in particular. There are two main brands of liqueurs, LeRoux and DeKuyper. Someone in the Temple Beth-El catering kitchen left meat out overnight. The supervising rabbinical organization decertified us as kosher as a result. The management had to find another certifying organization to maintain kashrut status. They found a group to which it had to pay inflated rates, and on their first pass through our facility, declared the brand of liqueur we were using (despite its kosher status) as “not kosher enough” and we had to switch to the other. Even the Absolut vodka had to go. Each of us bartenders brought home multiple bottles of liqueur and vodka on that account, but it all seemed like graft and palm-greasing to me.

⁸ The firm I joined was run by two Jews. I had the opportunity to sit in on two Beth Din tribunals in deepest Brooklyn where the Rabbi was essentially agreed to be an arbitrator, keeping the case out of the secular courts.

⁹ This is where I had my second “you must be kidding me” moment. I scheduled a meeting with the rabbi to ask one (to my mind, loaded) question: “Is it more important to be a good person, or more important to follow the prohibitions and requirements of rituals found in the Torah?” I expected a forward-thinking person like him to answer that the former was more important, as it had real-life consequences, while the latter did not. His answer, that one must do both, surprised me, and further eroded my confidence in the infallibility of what was always presented as G-d’s own word.

¹⁰ For instance, it was unusual to not have Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and the first day of Passover off from work and school.

any children would be raised Jewish. I joined Congregation B’Nai Israel shortly after my arrival, in part to maintain some semblance of the prayers, rituals and outlook I was accustomed to.¹¹

While that marriage did not last, I decided to stay in Arkansas, having built a law practice that would be difficult or impossible to start from scratch and duplicate had I moved anywhere else. Several years later I met my wife Regina, who grew up in the heavily Catholic enclave of Tontitown. I again broached the subject of the religion of any children we might have, and while again I would not presume to dictate her religion, I did secure her commitment to raise our children Jewish, with the caveat that we would always celebrate Christmas, however secularly. The family gatherings continued three times a year, and we (or I) have made at least one of them just about every year. To my surprise, several of my family members that married outside the religion are raising their children either secularly or in the religion of their spouses. To each their own.

I have appreciated the socio-political outlook of our congregation generally, and of our former and current Rabbis in particular. We have not pulled the kids from school for the major holidays, and do not keep kosher, and drive and work (sometimes) on Saturdays, but having attended nine years of Religious School at CBI, there is no doubt that our children are being raised Jewish. I hope to have Jewish grandchildren one day, but again, to each their own. At least, they will have the grounding that their Jewish education has brought them, even if we are a bit loose about ritual and observance.

Stripped of the notion that the Torah is literally the word of G-d and that stories in Genesis (and probably Exodus) are literal historical truth, and stripped of much of the mandatory rituals and proscriptions contained therein,¹² why, then, worry about my children’s religion, or even my own? Simply, I am proud I can trace my religious roots back at least 2500 years. I value the emphasis on intellectualism it brings. I respect a religion where agnostics or secularists are welcome, at least in the Reform movement. I like the idea that questioning is welcomed, where one does not have to “turn their brain off” to fully embrace faith. My experiences and recent Jewish history compel me to attempt to propagate the faith both in honor of my ancestors and to the betterment of the moral, ethical and intellectual grounding of our children. Like the best aspects of most religions with which I am familiar, it teaches there is a force and there are concerns, whether from G-d, karma, or others, that is bigger than the individual. And, while perhaps not a perfect belief system, that is good enough for me.

¹¹ The other part was because Trudy is such a good representative and salesperson of our congregation.

¹² And, bluntly, stripped of any abiding belief in a supernatural G-d as creator and Judge in the first place.