

Reflections on Jewish Identity

Washington, DC
2015/5775



Minyan
of Thinkers

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The Minyan of Thinkers: An Introduction and Acknowledgments

“There’s something here.” “Yeah something happened this year.” A few of us sat outside of Chop’t near Metro Center, clustered around two tables we had pushed together, reflecting on that evening’s Minyan of Thinkers meeting. Looking back, there was something magical that happened this year.



The Minyan of Thinkers, or MOT (em oh tee), is a group of intellectually curious, spiritual young professionals in the DC area from across the Jewish ideological spectrum who want to think deeply and critically about major contemporary Jewish topics with their peers in a sustained learning group. Our group is grounded in text-study, but not biblical or rabbinic. Instead we focus on academic or current scholarship that address a key issue facing our community. We come together monthly to flesh out the arguments in these texts, dialogue about what we believe based on our understanding of the articles and also sharing our own experiences.

We then take time to write reflection pieces that synthesize a new idea that we had or something we learned from our year together. The purpose of the written pieces by minyan members is to help us synthesize what we have learned, but also to help share out ideas with the larger community. We want to be a little ripple of critical thinking that spreads outward to many more than just those in our monthly sessions. Our goal is to bring new ways of thinking to challenging problems we face as a Jewish community, to help move us forward in some small way.

We aren’t experts on this particular topic. We don’t have doctorates in Jewish identity. What gives us credibility as a group is that we are seriously committed to intellectually honest conversation using the best available data and research. We keep talking about the issues for a whole year, as a cohort, so not only are we learning about the issue, but we are learning about each other. It’s a place to learn but also to feel at home. It creates a space where we can struggle with critical Jewish issues with other open-minded young people. Our goal is to be able to help each other and other young professionals to think more critically about our faith/culture/ethnicity and find our voice on challenging issues.

When it comes to hard issues, sometimes the most extreme voices make more thoughtful people shut down. Our goal was to create a place where that wouldn’t happen. This would be a place where we wouldn’t attack each other, and people could feel safe exploring what they think and believe. We don’t need to have attended Jewish day school, or even Hebrew school. We don’t need to believe in God or in the divinity of the Torah. We can be secular, religious, agnostic, denominationally-affiliated, completely unaffiliated, and everything in between. This minyan expands the concept of what Jewish learning is and who can learn Jewishly.



We met for the first time in December, where talented Gather the Jews Director Rachel Gildiner served as our guest speaker. In a thoughtful Torah study discussion, Rachel

pushed us to think about what it means to have a holy conversation, and how we can make our minyan sessions meaningful and substantive. We also took this time to share out with the group ways in which we have felt connected to the Jewish community and ways that we have felt alienated. I don't think we realized at the time that this theme of inside/outside would follow us for the rest of our cohort year.

We talked about what our big Jewish issues are and what issue we want to tackle for the year together. Lots of ideas came up. We started with a list of dialogue topics and ended up doubling the size of the list by the end of the conversation. Somehow, though, we kept going back to the issue of Jewish identity. Some questions immediately starting bubbling up. Why do some Jews tell other Jews whether they are Jewish or how they are Jewish? Are labels important for understanding identity? How are people choosing to identify Jewishly? What does it mean to be Jewish? Is there anything that is consistent across all people who identify as Jewish? Is that important?

Once we picked our topic for the year, we immediately reached out to several rabbis, scholars, and Jewish leaders who served as our Minyan Scholars. They provided invaluable guidance every step of the way for us. The most critical was helping us find provocative articles and contemporary texts related to our chosen topic of Jewish identity. It's hard to explain how amazing our group of scholars were. They are dynamite, powerhouses all on their own. So having their combined help was pretty unbelievable. Being a small, unaffiliated, non-denominational, non-institutional group might have been a turn-off for some leaders. However, these scholars helped us purely out of generosity and a belief in what we were trying to accomplish. We are grateful for their support.

Our first thought was to start with the 2013 Pew study, "A Portrait of Jewish Americans." In particular the study has a chapter on Jewish identity (chapter three). We wanted to look at some demographic data to understand what the national picture of Jewish identity looked like. In our pilot year, when we focused on intermarriage and conversion, we looked at the 2000–2001 National Jewish Population Survey. Since that time, the Pew study came out, so this was the perfect opportunity to figure out what we thought about it.

We knew that it had been analyzed ad nauseam by Jewish scholars. But we needed to understand it for ourselves—especially because it was speaking to our generation of Jewish Americans. Because Sixth and I had hosted a hugely successful panel discussion on the study, we reached out to the brilliant team of rabbis there. Rabbi Shira Stutman of Sixth and I Synagogue, the earliest and founding supporter of the minyan, referred us to one of the panelists, Bethamie Horowitz, Research Assistant Professor of Jewish Education at New York University. Horowitz took the time to carefully understand the nature of our group, and subsequently sent a small number of articles that seemed appropriate for what we were doing. We appreciated reading her articles because they offered a different way to think about Jewish identity than the Pew study.

About the same time we reached out to Aliza Mazor, Executive Director of Bikkurim in New York. Despite us being a DC-based group, she took the time to also get to know us and referred us to the powerhouse thinker, Steve Cohen, who graciously sent us some pieces of his own. We ended up choosing to read the article, "The Pew Survey Reanalyzed" because it also had accompanying counter-articles and a counter-response from Cohen and co-author Wertheimer.

Finally, we reached out to Rabbi Greg Harris of Beth El Synagogue in Bethesda. Rabbi Harris has been a supporter of the minyan when it was first being developed through the ConnectGens Fellowship sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington and PresentTense. Having gone on his own intellectual and spiritual journey during his recent sabbatical, Rabbi Harris was well-positioned to offer us a number of articles relating to our topic of Jewish identity. Actually the ones we picked were pieces on Christian religious community issues which helped us put some of the Jewish issues of identity and affiliation into some national context.



From January to April, we read and discussed these articles, trying to understand what they said, what they weren't saying, and what we thought about the arguments presented. In May we had our minyan's first public shareout event, graciously hosted by Adas Israel Synagogue with Rabbi Gil Steinlauf as our guest speaker. In addition to our own minyan members, we had a wonderful group of thoughtful young Jewish professionals from the larger DC community. Rabbi Gil used a variety of Torah texts to help us think more about Jewish identity and in particular the concept of being inside vs. outside. It was everything we dreamed about and more.

After our first successful shareout, we had the challenge of coming back together to try to make sense of what we had learned from all of our discussions. What new ground did we come to on the topic of Jewish identity? What gems of knowledge or truth did we gain? And how could we start to articulate it to others? We spent the next several months working on written reflection pieces to hone in on major lessons learned from the year. We took time to share out in pairs to give each other feedback,

and we did a lot of group sharing too. We wrote pieces, completely scrapped them, re-wrote them, and revised some more. We had no idea how difficult it would be to craft these kinds of pieces, that are both personal and also make sense of scholarship and big Jewish issues like identity.

In the middle of those months of writing, we went on a group retreat, hosted at Beth El Synagogue, to brainstorm how we wanted to close out our year. It was an incredible day led by Andy Kirschner, who sits on the minyan's board and oversees all of the minyan's activities. Overseeing the development of the minyan during its infancy as part of the ConnectGens Fellowship, and then participating as a member in the pilot year, Andy knows the minyan inside and out. He facilitated several workshops during our retreat on how to share our journey with the larger community. Other guest speakers included writer and blogger Michele Grossman, as well as the other members of our small but mighty board, Chazan Matt Klein of Beth El Synagogue in Bethesda, and Rabbi Elyssa Joy Auster.

The retreat pumped us up to push through the challenge of finishing our written pieces. The collection you are about to read includes some of those pieces. They are honest and raw and real. They aren't polished articles that have gone through ten layers of quality review. We can't afford a professional editing and design team—yet. But we don't care. We want to share our thoughts with you in the hope that it can empower you to find your own voice and not be afraid to figure out what you believe on tough Jewish issues.



Despite our incredibly demanding professional, extra-curricular, religious, and social schedules,

a group of us managed to meet every month for two hours. This is nothing short of miraculous. I guess there was something that kept us coming back. And we had a lot of invisible- and visible help from some amazing Jewish leaders. Many are mentioned above.

Others include Rabbi Aaron Miller of Washington Hebrew, who has supported the minyan and has cheered on our progress; Rabbi Mychal Copeland of InterFaith Family, who always takes time to answer our questions and guide us along; David Manchester, a Jewish data expert and leader who has helped keep the minyan on track since the pilot year several years ago; Sarah Arenstein, Director of Young Leadership at the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington who has brainstormed with us countless times to help us grow and sustain our work; and Dara Steinberg, Executive Director of the Lippman

Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah who has helped us think strategically about our group so it can maximize its impact. In addition, we are so grateful for the generous grants we received from Moishe House for each of our monthly meetings that literally kept us afloat this year. Our project absolutely could not have happened without Moishe House. We don't mean just financially. They empowered us with their own retreats and equipped us with the tools to be a new generation of leaders.

If you are curious about our little entity, want to get involved, or want to help us grow, let us know: minyanofthinkers@gmail.com.

The Minyan of Thinkers, 2014-2015 Cohort:

Amy Egan, Rafi Glazer, Kelley Kidd, Rebecca Kraushaar, Mariel Leonard, Johanna Ostrich, Rebecca Ostrich, Cheryl Pruce, Alyssa Schwartz

Testimonials

“My Judaism is also centered around its ability to grow with me—not only does it support me in my change, it often changes with me. The last year has been a particular time of exploration of how my Judaism fits into my life, and Minyan of Thinkers was crucial to that. The group gave me a space to engage intellectually with the ineffable, and to consider what Judaism means to me and to a community broader than myself.”

Confronting the question of Judaism in America, which is what my time in Minyan of Thinkers was largely spent discussing, calls on Judaism itself to stop and listen, and to attend to the transition. Minyan of Thinkers was a space that allowed me to participate in that effort, to pay attention to where the tradition stands, to explore the differences of opinion, and to explore where I hold myself within that framework. It was both a space where I was able to connect my personal uncertainty, curiosity, exploration, and complex but unwavering care for Judaism to the same feelings within the Jewish community itself. It allowed me to enter into a dialogue with the existence of a Jewish community, and to deeply consider what that community and I require from one another to not only survive, but thrive. This amazing group of people challenged me to consider things from outside my own perspective, to honor the moment of transition that Judaism is in, and to notice my own role in how that grows from here.”

—Kelley Kidd

“My first Minyan of Thinkers meeting was not long after I had moved to DC, when I was feeling unsure of myself, my Jewish identity, and my community. MoT has helped me to think deeply about my Judaism and has given me confidence in my Jewishness. A year later, I feel comfortable and confident, and am thankful to the Minyan of Thinkers for providing a safe space for addressing weighty issues.”

—Alyssa Schwartz

“When I come to these Minyan of Thinkers meetings, the intellectual Jew in me lights up. I finally feel like I have a community of people who agree that we need to apply critical thought to our faith, and who think text study is crucial but doesn’t need to stay confined to classic Jewish texts. I am grateful for this group, which has certainly made my Jewish spirit come to life. Thank you to this incredible quorum for giving me a place to call home and to feel Jewishly alive. For other young people reading this, trying to figure out your own Jewish identity: I hope you also find a place where you light up Jewishly. And if you can’t find a place, start one. If you want to talk more, anyone in our minyan would love to hear more about your story and what you are wanting and needing in your Jewish life. Wishing you a meaningful journey!”

—Cheryl Pruce

“I initially approached Minyan of Thinkers like a class. I read the articles, pen in hand, and made notes and observations in the margins. I came ready to argue, or at least make a point. Isn’t that what people in D.C. do? Isn’t that what Jews do? We had plenty of thought-provoking discussions at Minyan of Thinkers, and it was this opportunity to think and talk and debate, but it was more. Minyan of Thinkers was like a real minyan. There weren’t always 10 of us, and we didn’t daven, yet the space we created brought me closer to Judaism. It made me feel less alone, and more a part of a community. Thank you Minyan of Thinkers for counting me in your minyan!”

—Rebecca Kraushaar



Personal Reflections

I have never been the coolest kid, or the most athletic, but when it came to Judaism, I have always been on the “inside.” A life of connections to Rabbis and educators, and an upbringing that included Jewish day school, Jewish camp and Jewish youth group, I have the knowledge to hold my own in most conversations about Israel and the “Jewish geography” connections to feel part of a community greater than just those around me. I work for a Jewish organization, I volunteer at another Jewish organization, and every week I am excited for Shabbat and to be able to host family and friends for Shabbat dinner.

I am unlike all those “others” that have been talked about in studies of Jews who have not had a formal Jewish education and lack a connection to traditional Jewish structures and practices. I can find comfort in any denomination’s services and my connection to Israel has been strengthened by the Birthright-Israel trips that I have led. I am knowledgeable, eager to participate, and connected. I am not like other millennials that the Jewish world has to chase down and create unlimited free programming in order to bring in the door.

And yet I am exactly like those “others.” Despite my background, I have not joined a synagogue because I feel connections to a number of synagogues in my area. When I do show up it is more likely for Kiddush lunch to catch up with my peers and not a connection to the prayers, which can feel both mysteriously familiar and frustratingly intangible at the same time. I am just like those who chose not to identify themselves in denominations solidified decades ago and who seek out conversations with those who practice other religions so that I

can better appreciate how the whole world fits together. With so many interests and activities available, I am not in the mindset to consider one organization or institution the “voice” that speaks for me, which is why synagogues have such a hard time “reeling me in”; I have very specific interests and a synagogue can only cover a portion. Consequently, I am less likely to join one than I am to connect on various levels with various organizations so that through this web, all my interests can be met.

Above all, my generation is impressively empathetic and altruistic. The idea that millennials are only focused on themselves is misleading. We want to feel connected to great movements making the world a better place, but need to feel that we are embedded into the efforts, and not tangential to that success. This may be why many avoid synagogues, even those with a Social Action committee, for more specifically focused social justice organizations.

Many have said that Judaism has a marketing problem, and others have said that Judaism has an education problem. I disagree. I think that Judaism has, to quote Cool Hand Luke, “a failure to communicate.” For a people where 85% attend college (Smokler, 2014), we are impressively unintelligent about how to connect our generation to great aspects of Judaism. Many of those who I have staffed a Birthright-Israel trip for are incredibly proud of their Judaism and yet have no knowledge of what sets Judaism apart from any other religion (when the Pew study says that 34% of Jews believe that Jews can believe in Jesus, you see the crux of the problem). Without that knowledge, simply being proud of one’s heritage does not convey any relief to those doomsayers who see the end

of organized religion within a generation. But just teaching that knowledge is not enough. As someone who grew up with all that learning, I have not been impressed with the way that Jews teach Judaism. Its primary focus has been on membership with a synagogue as a way to connect to the Jewish community. For a generation who connects with the world differently, that learning has not been able to spark interest in synagogue attendance as a way to express Judaism. And when that primary focus is unsuccessful, it is not surprising that millennials turn away from those organizations. Yet as synagogue membership is still the primary way we define the vitality of the Jewish community, we compound the idea that the millennial generation is dooming the future of Judaism.

I have read numerous articles that Jewish education is integral to a commitment to engaging younger Jews in synagogue life. As someone who has had all that and still struggles to connect to the Jewish world, I think the answer is something more. The millennial generation thinks differently than previous ones about how and why to connect to Judaism. It is no less important to us than it is to you, we just approach it in different ways. But don't stop trying, because this generation will change the world. I know that for sure, just as I am certain that the one thing millennials agree upon is that we all hate being called millennials.

Kelley Kidd

I have a tattoo on my wrist that says “Shema.” Bound as a sign upon my hand, it reminds me morning and night, “Stop. Pay attention. What can you find here?” It challenges me to seek the growth and beauty in whatever fiery being I may be wrestling with, and it reminds me to consciously seek sacredness in everything. Since I first decided to convert at the age of 12, when I somehow recognized something that spoke to me in ritualized praise for existence, Judaism has always called on me to notice.

For a long time after that, Judaism held a very personal space in my life. Its being part of me reminded me of the power of expressing gratitude for having woken up every day and of deeply taking stock of what you can do differently every year. In college, as I learned more about religion, I was exposed to the universality of awe for moments of in between. I encountered the recurring awe for crossroads and crosses and water and seasons and sunsets. I fell in love with the ways humans mark moments that exist in the ephemeral space between one thing ending and another beginning. These are times when somehow the distance between us and whatever we call the feeling of connectedness to an infinite seems to shrink, and reflection and prayer seem not to have so far to travel.

Once I graduated, I dove headfirst into Jewish life. In AVODAH and after, my Judaism suddenly went from being a framework for my own thoughts to a tangible and all encompassing reality. It became my home, my relationship, my friendships, the framework for most of my thought. I worked at a synagogue, and the structures of Jewish life became my own. I finally began to learn more deeply about its

rhythms, and I discovered that one of the most resonant elements of Judaism for me is its capacity to mark and honor the elusive power of transitory moments. At regular intervals—daily, weekly, seasonally, yearly, every time anything happens that causes a change—Judaism asks you to pause, to observe it, to name it and give it weight, and even to say thank you for it.

Every new morning, we are called on to say thank you, and every Shabbat, to stop and breathe. A mikvah allows you to literally submerge yourself in the experience of being in between.

Having recently moved from DC to San Francisco, I have spent the last several months steeped in transition. I have, however, regularly forgotten to give the power of moments of change the weight they demand. I have also let my Jewish life slide between the cracks. I find it unlikely that these two things are unrelated. I hadn't noticed the degree to which I trusted my Judaism to hold a space where the exploration of in-between moments could occur. I often even resented it for occupying so much of my time. But it was a source of stillness and quiet, rhythmic and reliable, and in its absence I've found an absence of both.

My relationship with my Judaism is in constant flux, and I do not doubt that it will continue to shift and transform with me. However, the power of my Judaism is that it asks me to listen, and from the moment I dove into a lake or got this tattoo or stepped into a synagogue every day for a year or cried when I didn't know if I'd have challah for Rosh Hashanah, I have been reminded again and again.

Rebecca Kraushaar

I'm guilty of using some version of this line: "I like you a lot, but it won't work because you're not Jewish." I stopped using this line when I met Jim, my now-husband. The words never came out of my mouth. I fell in love, really hard. Lines in the sand were nothing compared to this wave. Jim would call and my heart would flood. My parents tried to pull me back, my grandmothers tried to pull me back, reminding me "he's not Jewish," but I was in too deep.

My Jewish resume goes something like this: "Raised in a Conservative home. Kept kosher and lit Shabbat candles every Friday night. Went to Jewish day school until sixth grade. Semi-active in USY and Hillel." I loved being Jewish, except when I hated being Jewish. I hated the transition from Jewish day school to public school. I hated being the only Jewish kid to take off for holidays. I hated explaining kosher, and opted instead to become a vegetarian. I hated the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I hated the constant threat of anti-Semitism. I hated the way my family was different. The way that I was different. I hated

myself for not being enough. I hated G-d for making me this way.

And then I met Jim. The angst and doubt disappeared. I thanked G-d for my entire life's journey. I was 22. I realized that no matter the ups and downs, G-d had delivered me to this moment, to kiss the guy I really liked. I thanked G-d. I praised G-d. Love felt holy. It's embarrassing. I understood that Jim wasn't Jewish. I understood that this has deterred me in the past. But it didn't matter.

It continued not to matter for a year. And then my mom had a heart attack and died. Jim was with me when I got the call. He drove me to the hospital. He was next to me at the funeral. He sat shiva with me. He even accompanied me to synagogue to say the mourner's kaddish. My rabbi told me, "this guy's a keeper." Jim said that he never felt closer to me. I felt like a stranger to myself.

It was confusing. I wanted to be alone, but Jim was there, with a kippah on. I wanted to be alone, but members of the synagogue were

in the living room, helping me pray. I couldn't have gotten through it without Jim or without the Jewish community. I had believed that the two were incompatible, but here I was introducing my non-Jewish boyfriend to the Jewish teachers and families I grew up with. I know my mom dreamed of me marrying a nice Jewish guy, but I also know she would have been so proud of the man I was with.

That was 2009. Five years later we got engaged. It's amazing how sticky that line is—"I like you a lot, but it won't work because you're not Jewish." With a ring on my finger I said those words to my now-fiance. Jim stared at me and said, "I can't believe what you're saying."

I was scared and confused. I loved Jim, but I loved Judaism. I loved lighting Shabbat candles. I loved Jewish melodies. I loved learning Torah. I loved Passover. I loved Hebrew. I loved Jewish history. I loved Jewish ethics. I loved Israel. I loved Jewish humor. I loved my family. I loved my people. I loved G-d. And this was not what G-d or my people wanted of me. Look at the Pew Study. I was just another Jewish girl breaking the chain.

We got married on June 7, 2015. It took a lot of work to get to the huppah. Jim and I talked. And we listened to each other. And then we talked to Rabbi Shira. She officiated the wedding and counseled us through the entire process. The wedding was joyous and very Jewish—I wore my mom's Israeli wedding dress, Jim's mom quilted the huppah, our friend designed the ketubah, and both my ninety-plus grandmothers walked down the aisle while my friend sang "Dodi Li." Everyone—Jim's family, my family, our friends—danced a bouncy, sweaty Horah.

My one regret—after we signed the ketubah Rabbi Shira told us that G-d dwells with the couple under the huppah, and we could offer up any prayers we wanted. I meant to offer a few prayers to G-d while I was under there, but I was distracted. So here they are now: "Ribono Shel Olam, thank you for giving me the strength, courage, support and love to make it to the huppah. Thank you for my chatan, my groom, Jim. Help us to build a proud and happy Jewish home. Grant us the chutzpah to make it work."

Marriel Leonard

I remember the first time I felt Jewish. I was at a Shabbat dinner hosted by the parents of some friends of my then-boyfriend, a rabbinical student. We had arrived bearing some sort of dish, he had led the Kabbalat Shabbat prayers, we said Kiddush and all trooped into the kitchen to wash and then back out to say Hamotzi, and I had fit in. The last time I had visited him, I had been asked by the student gabbai if I wanted the honor of dressing the Torah on Shabbat morning. I hadn't even known what she was saying. But now I was deeper into my conversion course, and davened regularly, and memorized the prayers (practiced endlessly with my boyfriend) and no one knew I wasn't Jewish. That he was a rabbinical student gave me an additional seal of approval. And then some time during the midst of the meal, the very Jewish mother of the boyfriend's friends asked me about myself. For some reason, she asked me what my Jewish name was. "Actually, I'm converting, so I don't have one yet." No one has ever become so suspicious of me so quickly, not even the time I came back from a party over winter break of my freshman year of college, and my father asked me if I was drunk and I lied through my wine-stained lips. Her smile stayed in place but it became a mask. Behind it now lay the wary eyes of a trauma survivor. I got that look a lot as I continued the conversion

process, until I learned to evade the questions and answers that would earn it. To this day, I am careful about when or how I admit my conversion. I am ashamed on behalf of other Jews when I think about how I and other converts are treated, both before and after the mikvah. By comparison, my decidedly anti-religion family has been far more supportive than many Jews.

After the now-rabbi and I broke up, I floated, aimlessly, through my Judaism. Unfortunately, as a convert, my Jewish identity is complicated by the fact that I did not have a cultural or ethnic Judaism to reference, nor is my practice native to me: it was learned, and recently. It didn't feel like my practice; it didn't feel like ME. I stopped going to services. I yelled at God. I daydreamed about cheeseburgers, even as I became more strict in my eating habits. I occasionally lit candles but I used the computer on Shabbat, I went shopping on Shabbat, I did all the things one is not supposed to do on Shabbat, that I had not done on Shabbat since I started converting, and I hated it. Yet I kept doing it because I didn't know what my practice was and at least I could own my self-destructive mess. I joined JDate because I was lonely and wanted a partner in practice; I wanted to not be the only Jew sitting at the

dinner table on Christmas. But all the guys I met on JDate were there because they felt they had to marry a Jew, but had no desire to act Jewish. Once, one of these men asked me if I really was Jewish. “Would you like a letter from my rabbi?” I quipped, and then walked away. I do have such a letter, signed by not one but 3 rabbis, attesting to my time before the beit din. It doesn’t make me feel Jewish though, and it wouldn’t be good enough for those men. I was not Jewish enough for them, but I was too Jewish to be or date a non-Jew.

As a native Washingtonian, there are many things I don’t like about my home town, but I am delighted and proud of the unabashed geekiness that flourishes here. Reading and learning have always been my solace. I came to Judaism through reading and learning, and stayed for the wonder and mystery. Intellectualism is not the sum total of Judaism (nor should it be) but it should be an unavoidable part. So when another friend told me about this group called Minyan of Thinkers, I jumped at the chance to join. Now I knew others who were curious about Judaism the way I was, who didn’t care that I had converted, who didn’t care how or when I practiced, and they shared their struggles with me. And I found Sixth & I and started taking classes and attending lectures. Suddenly I started recognizing people from various minyans and while I can’t say my

social circle has expanded tremendously, my community has. I met a guy who both wanted to date me and practiced Judaism. In a rather appalling but at least sort of funny turn-around, I rejected him initially, because he is Orthodox, and that was just ‘too Jewish.’ Luckily we got past that, and now, between MOT, Sixth & I, and my boyfriend, I have others in my life who speak the same language of practice and choosing to be Jewish and contemplating the meaning of spirituality and tikkun olam. I still hate gefilte fish, but religion is not the only thing that binds me to Judaism.

Not long after we started dating, the Charlie Hebdo/kosher supermarkets shootings occurred. I flew to the Netherlands shortly after that, and I realized that to an anti-semitic, all of our distinctions and arguments about practice and identity mean nothing. I would be just as much a target as someone descended from Moses himself. Our petty infighting means nothing to someone who wants to kill us. For a third time I felt profoundly like I fit in. Can I claim ethnic pride? Not exactly, although it’s funny that non-Jews always mistake my ethnic background, while only Jews have ever correctly identified me as Irish. But I have found solidarity and, more importantly, a sense of peoplehood. For so long I felt like an outsider looking in—first as an outsider, and then as an insider—but no longer. I am Jewish.

Cheryl Pruce

I held up the long jean skirt, and eyeballed fractions of fabric. I laid it back on my bed, and unsteadily cut the bottom 2/3 off. As I slipped on my new jean mini-skirt over the black leggings I already had on, the girl I saw in the mirror felt somehow closer to the woman I wanted to become.

Over the course of a few years, I would trade in my long skirts and long-sleeve button-downs for jeans, crop-tops, little dresses, and heels. Pre-tearing toilet paper and taping light switches melted away into Hillel Shabbat dinners and after-parties. Morning prayer shifted from bolting through the traditional prayer book in my fastest Hebrew to whispering a few gender-neutral English readings in a prayer book I had taken ten years to craft. Saturdays transitioned from shul and Shabbos lunch to running club and tutoring a low-income teenager. Prayer accessories went from nothing at all, to wearing my bright pink sequined tallit, back again to nothing at all. Yom Kippur went from all-day synagogue to all-day TV session, from fasting, to absolutely not fasting, to trying to fast if I could.

I labeled myself Conservative, traditional, modern Orthodox, traditional progressive, non-denominational, just Jewish, Reconstructionist. I added Reform, went back to calling myself non-denominational, added progressive. Scrapped all those for Jewish, theist, humanist (the social-justice-humanist, not the non-God-secular kind).

Last year, a friend handed me an envelope with a picture in it. A younger me, with shorter hair, braces, acne, long skirt, long-sleeve shirt, and a big smile. It was such a different person and yet exactly the same me. My identity had bounced

to several different places on the Jewish ideological spectrum. Had Pew surveyed me each year between the ages of 15 and 30, I'd probably have different answers to almost every question on Jewish identity. At different points, my answers might not make any sense, like identifying both as non-denominational and also as a Reform Jew. The extent to which the Holocaust and Israel are central to my identity changes almost monthly. If Pew had asked me the question of what is essential to being Jewish in high school vs. college vs. my early young professional years vs. now, that list would look pretty different. There are times in my life when Jewish learning or Torah study was one of the most central parts of my Jewish identity. Other times social justice was at the top of the list. Being a Holocaust survivor granddaughter has been more and less salient in my own identity and life. Prayer and rituals have been at the top, middle, and bottom of my list at various points.

This is all because my Jewish identity doesn't exist in a vacuum, but moves with me as I evolve as a whole person, Jewishness included. When I attended Jewish day school for high school, traditional rituals became more germane in my Jewish life. When I was flung into a hyper intellectual, secular college environment, my Jewish identity evolved accordingly. As I grow into a young adult, building community and hosting holiday meals has become one of the key aspects of my Jewish identity.

To be fair, I'm not completely mercurial. I have been and hopefully always will strive to lead an ethical life and generally be a good person. But what does this dynamic nature to my Jewish identity mean in terms of understanding larger conceptions of Jewish identity? I think it means

that Jewishness is an ever-flowing stream that moves with social undercurrents, national norms, global phenomena, and personal experiences. It means that large, demographic studies like the Pew study on Jewish Americans are illuminating but limited in highlighting the complex, multi-faceted nature of respondents' Jewishness.

And if we are serious about building a strong, thriving, active, proud, next generation of Jews, who can stand up to the increasing anti-Semitism around the world, we need to see Jewish identity as a complex, evolving web of multiple identities, priorities, experiences, and perspectives. To be clear, this is not my idea. Someone much smarter and wiser than me has been talking about this for years. Bethamie Horowitz, Research Assistant Professor of Jewish Education at New York University, poses some great questions about Jewish identity in her piece, *Connections and Journeys: Shifting Identities Among American Jews*: "What is the meaning of being Jewish in the fabric of peoples' lives and how is this expressed and experienced? How central is the Jewish component of a person's identity and what role if any does being Jewish play in a person's thinking, planning, and decision-making? How does a person's Jewishness evolve over the life course? (p.7)".

What I love about Horowitz's approach to understanding and studying Jewish identity is that she delves deeply into the various ways Jewish Americans identify, Jewishly and otherwise, and explores how that identification changes over time depending on a variety of contextual life factors.

What I've come to learn this year is that Jewish identity is multi-dimensional and changes substantially over the course of a person's life. It can be connected to people's lineage and family as an ethnic identification; it can be an alignment with a set of ideological beliefs; it can be an

affiliation with a Jewish entity, religious or otherwise; it can be a set of practices or behaviors. It can be a cultural or ethnic identification even if someone has a different religious affiliation. It can be a cultural affiliation even if someone wasn't born Jewish.

So then what does it mean to be Jewish? What makes us all part of the same community, if there is such a diversity of thought and behavior? Here's the closest I have come to answering this. I think that being Jewish is

1. **identifying** as being part of the Israelite historical narrative of moving from slavery to freedom (i.e., this is my people); and
2. **acting** on that consciousness by engaging in Jewish communal experiences that build community or create positive social change in the world.

That could be anything from welcoming guests into your home for Shabbat to fighting HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. It could mean visiting the sick in a hospital or donating money to inner-city schools. You don't need to be born Jewish to identify with the Israelite historical narrative—that is a compelling story for all those who are in our community, from the most religious to the most secular. We are all trying to free ourselves from things that enslave us, and trying to be our best selves.

As far as the changing nature of our identities, the key challenge for our community moving forward is how to make Judaism light up for young people at various stages of their lives. Instead of worrying about whether someone is Jewish, or Jewish enough, we will need to think critically and creatively about how to make Jewishness compelling for people who have multiple and overlapping racial, ethnic, cultural, spiritual, religious, and professional identities.

Alyssa Schwartz

Being Jewish is something that has always been a central part of my identity, even when there were months or years where the only Jewish things I did were go to High Holiday services and keep Passover. The gestalt of Judaism matters to me in a meaningful way—the food, the Yiddishisms, the ethos of oppression—the things that aren't particularly Jewish as a whole. My brand of Judaism is made up almost entirely of a deep love of challah and matzah ball soup and a desire every once in a while to sing Debbie Friedman songs with several hundred strangers. It concerns me that these, non-essential, parts of Judaism are what call to me. Not because they're not important, but because they're so specific to my Ashkenazi, late 20th century Jewish life. They're not transferable, particularly, to those who wish to convert, and a Jew from Morocco or Italy would not recognize my Jewishness as much as I would not recognize theirs. If what it means to be a Jew is about food and music, instead of about religion, then I am concerned that the religion is not sustainable. It's not really my job to worry about how to keep Jews invested in joining synagogues, but it is my job to worry about how I will share the experiences that matter to me with my partner and children. Do I need to force my kids to spend Saturday mornings in shul for them to know how it feels to finally

get to Adon Olam? Or to wear uncomfortable shoes to Rosh Hashanah services, so that they can be as amused as I was as a child by the line of shoes discarded by women in each aisle? If what matters to me is the quiet before the She-ma, how do I teach them also that the words matter more?

It seems that Judaism is at a crossroads, in which traditional Judaism is becoming a purview of the extreme right, while “secular” Jewish values (tikkun olam, namely) become ever more alienated from the religious elements of Judaism. That is, there is little balance struck between thoughtful religious observance and the more secular values that Jews claim to hold dear—Orthodox Jews protesting at Pride, for example, using hired laborers as proxy. Jewish organizations like Bend the Arc and Avodah provide progressive Jews a Jewish outlet for living out their values, but the Jewish part is often thrown in to make it palatable to funders. We add a “text study” to a political campaign meeting because we're Jews and that's what Jews do, but it then becomes something of a token rather than something that is actually meaningful. If you make Judaism about values, instead of about religion, the essence of Judaism is lost. The Jewish community is a faith community, as uncomfortable as that sounds to progressive young adults who have grown up

in a world where faith connotes ignorance and intolerance.

When think pieces are produced about how the religious right must act and react in the face of changing societal norms, as with the Obergefell decision, I become outraged. Outraged because I think the religious right needs to get it together, but also outraged that words like “faith community” and “religious” are bandied about indiscriminately. I belong to a faith community—one that doesn’t think homosexuality is a sin and one that thinks changing sexual mores are a good thing. And I am religious in my own way. I may not believe in a divine power, and I certainly don’t believe that who I believe in will determine my placement in the afterlife, but I enjoy attending religious services, and I find meaning in prayer, even if the meaning I find is in the community saying the words and not in the words themselves. This is where those crossroads develop. My Jewish experience and values are significantly different from the Jewish experience and values of a rabbi at Agudath Israel or the Orthodox Union. That rabbi’s faith community is outraged by the Obergefell decision and does think that his religious values are threatened by equal marriage laws. When my faith community has more in common with the ACLU than with another wing of the same religion, I wonder what that says about the internal strength of the religion. I wonder if the religion will splinter, and who will lay claim to the broken pieces. I can easily imagine a world

in which the rightwing pick up the pieces and say they never wanted us anyway, that we were diluting what is pure and misrepresenting divine truth. And I can also easily imagine a world in which the progressive wing loses sight of the Judaism, where the desire to be so inclusive gives way to a community that is less a community and more an aggregate of people with shared interests and perhaps some common background. Perhaps this wouldn’t be a disaster. But something would certainly be lost.



I wrote these first three paragraphs in July, when Obergefell and Pride were fresh and the Jewish holidays were sparse. Three months later, after the High Holidays and the start of a new year, I have reason to hope that a faith-based progressive Judaism thrives. Friday nights are filled with Shabbos invitations and the weeknights are littered with Jewish extracurriculars. The panic of the summer faded when I spent a beautiful Wednesday at temple, fasting and praying with hundreds of other young Jews. Clearly there is a community for me and for my peers. At the same time, though, these questions still trouble me. As I fulfill the so-called duties of a Jewish adult, I will have to make choices that will form the foundation of my Jewish identity and that of my children. It’s a lot of responsibility, but one I am confident young Jews, through groups like Minyan of Thinkers, will be able to make with thoughtfulness.



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