

Learning to Define Myself as Jewish

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Until I started college, I never had to define myself as Jewish. I never had to introduce myself at SAR High School as an Orthodox Jew, nor did I have to explain why I did not eat Subway sandwiches or why I believed in a Jewish homeland. My extracurriculars, the school newspaper and Model UN, were never Jewish-related. Being Jewish was a given, not something I had to defend or explain.

But, when I came to college, I could not spend more than two minutes with someone before explaining that I kept kosher, so no, I could not join them for breakfast, and since I kept Shabbat, they should not expect a text from me for the next 25 hours. It was more than mere logistics—unless I told someone about my Judaism, it felt like they did not know me.

At first, I was embarrassed; it was as though I had a tic that compelled me to constantly discuss my Jewishness. Why couldn't I get through one conversation without talking about prayer or Shabbat? Was I so boring that the only topic I could talk about was my religious life?

Eventually, I realized why I felt compelled to immediately introduce myself as Jewish—it was simply that Judaism was/is the most central part of my identity, and for the first time, this identity required an introduction.

Secular College Is Not a Frat House

Before college, I had some vague sense of what I wanted my experience to be like—learn a lot, make new friends, and meet people different from the New York Jews with whom I had spent my whole life. I loved my friends, and I loved high school, but I wanted to go somewhere that would force me to leave the comfort of my “Jewish bubble.” So, I applied to Harvard, a place where the Jewish community was not *too* small, but also not *too* large.

But my priorities changed during my gap year in Migdal Oz, a Midrasha in Israel. I spent every day with a hundred other religious girls, and I had an amazing time. They motivated me to learn every day, to be more serious about my halakhic practice, and to think more deeply about my values. Since we were coming from a similar place with similar beliefs, it was not hard to make close friends and to grow a lot from those friendships. I wondered why I had desired to leave the bubble when the bubble was so fulfilling. I tried not to think about the end of the year, and I avoided talking about college, which I had begun to think of as the antithesis to Migdal Oz. Secular college would undoubtedly be a place of debauchery, devoid of values. So, when it came time to fill out my preferences for an assigned freshman year roommate, I expected the worst: “I want roommates who will NEVER bring men into the room; They should NEVER host parties; etc.”

To say that I was wrong would be an understatement. Sure, Harvard has some questionable traditions (let’s just say Primal Scream, when students run around naked in Harvard Yard, is not my favorite night of the year), but it is by no means the wild frat house I had anticipated. Instead, I met many students devoted to volunteering, classmates who were thoughtful and kind, and religious Catholic and Greek Orthodox friends whose lives, like mine, centered around their faith.

I found that my closest friends were Jewish, and that my closest friends who were not Jewish were religious. I spent most of my time at Hillel and appreciated that it functioned as a second home where I could pray, do work, learn, and eat meals with friends. Secular college was certainly not the “off-the *derekh*” (a path wherein people lose their religious values) machine of which I had been warned, but rather a place teeming with opportunities to commit oneself to the Jewish community.

More Subtle Challenges

Yet, to say that I had no social or intellectual challenges during my time here would be false. While I was pleasantly surprised to find an upstanding environment instead of my naive expectations of wild debauchery, I sometimes wonder if this feared degeneracy would have been better. For example, when Primal Scream occurs, it tends to unite our Orthodox community; we would never run around like *those* people, and we stand opposed to *that* culture. Like the Maccabees fighting against Hellenistic influence, so too do we shelter ourselves from the surrounding immorality.

The more difficult challenge was realizing that the students at a homeless shelter volunteer shift were really decent people, and hanging out with them left me feeling as fulfilled as a Hillel-organized hessed event. Indeed, discovering that I could find value and community outside the Orthodox sphere was threatening in a way that Primal Scream never could be.

I also had a greater sense of complacency—I succeeded in keeping kosher and observing Shabbat despite limited food options and mounds of work, so was it really *so* bad if I occasionally went to a party? Or, I managed to pray in the mornings despite early classes, so was it really *so* bad if I did not make it to *minyan*? The more I took on outside of Hillel, the less time I had to commit to Judaism. And sadly, I go to *Shaharit* (morning prayer services) and learn Torah far less frequently now than I did my freshman year, when I had fewer friends outside Hillel, fewer extracurricular activities, and less schoolwork.

Our Orthodox community also shrank during my time here, from a 45-person to a 25-person community. It became harder to learn Torah when there was less positive peer pressure to do so, or to use the Beit Midrash for Torah learning when people increasingly used it as a hangout space. Moreover, the temptation to build communities *outside* of Hillel grew much stronger when I had fewer friends *within* Hillel. These challenges sometimes made college feel lonely, and made me miss SAR and Migdal Oz's robust Jewish communities. And, though my experience has been largely positive, I have friends who cannot say the same.

Going “Off the *Derekh*”

Indeed, our Hillel has seen many people leave the Orthodox community, i.e., go “off the *derekh*.” This is primarily because college is the first place that people who have problems with Orthodoxy can *choose* to pursue a different religious path. While someone with doubts may still have to observe Shabbat and pray in an Orthodox synagogue when living with their parents, when they arrive at college, they can instead join the Conservative *minyan*. There are also social temptations that many who grew up in an Orthodox environment never faced before: friends who go out on Saturdays, friends who eat at non-kosher restaurants, and so on.

Moreover, since our Hillel is relatively small, there are people who do not find friends in the community and look outside of Hillel to form those relationships. This also leads people off the *derekh*—after all, it's hard to spend five hours at Hillel on a Shabbat afternoon without friends when one could be hanging out with one's theater friends at a show.

Place of Religious Growth

Nonetheless, I am convinced that college is a place of more religious growth than rejection. In fact, of the 25 people in our Orthodox community, five are *Ba'alei Teshuvah* (Jews who grew up in less observant households who become more observant). If college were such a hostile place for religious growth, I doubt 20 percent of our community would have actively chosen to join.

I think the trend of *Ba'alei Teshuvah* at college can be explained by two factors. One, Harvard is privileged to have the infrastructure to support someone who wants to grow religiously. We have a robust Hillel, an inviting Chabad, and a warm Meor. We have Jewish learning classes, free Shabbat meals, and a host of rabbis ready to offer advice and mentorship. Consequently, for students who never went to Jewish Day School, Harvard might be the first place they learn about Judaism and the first time they have a community, across the street from them, eager to invite them into the fold.

Second, college can be a time of intense loneliness. You are away from your family and home-community, and it is difficult to immediately find like-minded friends. Being religious, however, gives one a built-in community and a sense of belonging that can help alleviate that loneliness.

And religious growth is not limited to *Ba'alei Teshuvah*. As I mentioned before, college was the first time that I (who had grown up religious), had to define what exactly Judaism meant to me. I had to explain why I wore skirts and could not hug a person of the opposite gender. Being forced to offer these explanations helped me reinforce my observance. In fact, many of the religious questions that forced me to think the most were posed by my non-Jewish friends. “Why can you say: “Oh my God” if you can’t take God’s name in vain?” “Are you really allowed to eat with us given the prohibition against a non-Jew cooking for you?” “Could you hold up someone of the opposite gender if they were falling, or would that still be prohibited?”

College was also the first time that I could give up parts of my practice so *easily*, and that fear drove me to instill certain practices more diligently. At home, if I do not attend synagogue on a Shabbat morning, I still feel that it is Shabbat—my family is home, and we have Shabbat lunch as normal. In contrast, at school, Shabbat rarely feels like Shabbos until I leave my dorm for synagogue. Similarly, at SAR, people knew I was religious no matter how I dressed, but on campus, my dress-code standards feel a lot more telling.

Conclusion

Ultimately, secular college is not the place for every religiously observant Jew. For me, the main threats to religious identity came from finding meaning outside the Jewish community and from the complacency of “I am already doing so much to juggle my Jewish practice with all my other obligations.” Yet, I still maintain that I have grown more religiously in my years at Harvard than I have at any other stage in my life. Because, while my Jewish observance/engagement may have fluctuated while in college, it is also here that I gained clarity about my Jewish identity and what being Jewish means to me. And, while the challenges posed by secular college are definitely real, those same challenges have forced me to identify and guard my religious priorities more than I would in an all-Jewish environment.

