

2022 Short Story & Essay Contest: Honorable Mention, High School Essay Contest

Finding My Identity

By Phoebe Lewis, Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School

I've belonged to the same reform synagogue in D.C. since before I can remember. But I never felt completely valid in the Jewish community because my mom is Jewish but my dad isn't. I hid the fact that my dad, my aunts, uncles, and grandparents were Christian and that I celebrated Christmas with my family every year.

I had a hard time feeling like I completely belong, given that I was Jewish, but I didn't have the same family heritage as everyone else. So when it was time to begin planning and preparing for my Bat Mitzvah, I had very mixed feelings. I was excited for this big milestone in my life, but at the same time, there was a lump in my throat about having a "normal" Jewish rite of passage with a non-Jewish family.

Then the pandemic hit and we postponed my bat mitzvah. I was devastated. In my disappointment, I put Judaism to the side.

When the new bat mitzvah date began inching closer, I started dreading the day more and more. I felt so out of touch with Judaism and preparing for a bat mitzvah felt like a chore. I spent hours of my weekends on my rabbi's porch practicing prayers, talking about my Torah portion, and discussing what Judaism meant to me. Even while working hard to connect with my religion, there was persistent doubt and confusion. Eventually, the prayers were learned and the day's events got planned.

My bat mitzvah day was one full of hugs, some rain, Mazel Tovs and joy. On that day, reading from the Torah and delivering my speech, I felt like I knew what Judaism meant to me. After discussions with my rabbi, memories from years of Judaic studies, a trip to Israel, my friends, and hearing stories from my one living Jewish grandparent, I came to understand *my* Jewish identity. More than that, I was proud.

I do not have the typical Jewish family, but I know that does not mean I don't belong in the community. The cancellation of my bat mitzvah not only helped me realize what Judaism meant to me, but it helped me learn a much larger lesson. I learned to accept my identity and my family as they are and not how I wanted them to be. I was able to make the best and embrace my heritage. By accepting things the way they are, I am able to have a more positive outlook and be proud of who I am.