

High School Essay Winner

Judaism for Me

By Leo Kalb Bourke

Growing up as a member of an observant Jewish family in a largely non-Jewish neighborhood, I was regularly pressed to explain the grip my family's Judaism had on my life, and spent time decoding our kosher diet or observance of Shabbat. By second grade, I knew the ways I was different from everyone else: the only kid in my class unable to go to Friday night sleepovers or play in the Saturday morning neighborhood soccer league.

But as I grew older, that raw self-awareness fermented into a deep frustration. I began to see my family's religious practices as oppressive, and did not feel spiritually nourished by Judaism's institutional structure. In ninth grade, feeling restlessly resentful of Judaism's rules, I stopped attending synagogue. My family saw this as unacceptable. To them, to reject Judaism's laws was to reject Judaism itself. They loudly voiced their disapproval and disappointment.

But not my grandmother.

One evening three years ago, after my grandmother returned from a Rosh Hashana service that I'd refused to attend, she called me into the kitchen. "You know," she said quietly, slicing the carrots for her tzimmes, "I had trouble with religion, too."

She grew up in an observant household, but as a teenager and then as an adult she began to abandon Judaism's religious structure, and instead found meaning in its intellectual tradition—its literature and commentary, both of which would inform her later work as a writer.

As we talked, I began to consider how I could form my own ties to Judaism. But how could I truly find my own meaning in a system that, growing up, was so clearly defined for me? What does it mean to repudiate a tradition yet be fundamentally formed by it?

I found my answers as I probed my political conscience. Like my grandmother, I realized that stripping away the veneer of religious law that had previously characterized my relationship with Judaism allowed me to fully engage with the core values beneath. This has led me to embrace the secular values of the Diaspora—strive for justice, advocate for the powerless, remember our past—and fight for the underserved among us.

That's why, as soon as I was old enough, I began working in progressive politics. And it's why I've studied the history of Jewish progressivism. Learning about Black-Jewish solidarity during the civil rights movement and Jewish efforts to protect refugees worldwide has freed me to form a new relationship with Judaism, one that fuels my advocacy work while keeping me connected to the tradition that remains important to the people I love most.

My Jewish identity is not the one I was raised with, but it is mine. While I've abandoned institutional Judaism, I haven't escaped its gravitational pull. I still feel deeply Jewish, and its structure ultimately enabled me to form a new relationship with that tradition. What has changed is how I explain Judaism to myself. I have now found a meaning in Judaism that finally holds truth for me.