

The Dov and Arlein Chetner Chai Essay Competition 2005

Hilya Olyan

Why be a Jew?

Now there's a loaded question. I am a Jew by blood. I am a Jew by way of tradition. I am a Jew by destiny. And I am a Jew by choice.

Simply put, I am a Jew because my father is a Jew and my mother is a Jew. My grandparents were Jews and their grandparents before them were Jews and so on and so forth. I am a Jew by birth; a Jew by blood.

I am a Jew by way of tradition. To walk in the footsteps of the greats before me, to share in the traditions once assumed by the likes of Moses and of Judah; of Einstein and Freud; of Herzl, Ben-Gurion, and Golda Meir, of Benny Goodman and Harry Houdini – this is to be Jew. To know I share a common bond with some of the greatest thinkers and visionaries the world has ever seen, this is to be a Jew. Yitzchak Rabin lit the Shabbat candles every Friday night – so do I. Sandy Kofax fasted on Yom Kippur – so do I. Henry Kissinger refused to eat leaven bread each Passover – so do I. I celebrate Chanukah, Shavuot and Rosh Hashanah. But more importantly, I uphold the tradition of strong family ties, of a commitment to the State of Israel, of a dedication to Jewish education. My Savta shows unconditional love to our family – so will I. My father lived in Israel for some time – so will I. My mother attended Jewish day school – so did I and so will my children – Le Dor Va Dor.

I am a Jew by destiny. We are the chosen people - selected by G-d to live righteous and holy lives. Chosen to follow the commandments and the laws of the Torah, called upon to maintain the chosen way of life.

I am a Jew by choice. Upon my thirteenth birthday I became a Bat-Mitzvah – not because my parents wanted me to and not because my grandparents would be

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disappointed if I did not – I did it because I wanted to. I wanted to entrust myself with the continuance of Jewish traditions and I wanted to commit myself to the prosperity of the Jewish people.

Growing up, it never really occurred to me that I would, should or even could be anything other than a Jew. Attending Jewish day school seemed only logical. Spending my summer at Jewish camp was the only rational choice, and not being a part of the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization didn't even seem like an option. I went to synagogue when I was told, lit candles when I was supposed to, learned the words to Adon Olam, drank chicken soup when I was sick and ate as many latkahs as I could possible stuff into myself in a single sitting. I have identified with being a Jew for as long as I can remember. Judaism, while it is not my only defining attribute, has certainly been one of the most influential. That being said, I also identify myself as a Canadian. I associate not only with my Judaism, but also with cold winters, first-class skiing, and really great hockey.

I am a Canadian Jew. I am a member of a religious minority and a member of the larger civic population. I encompass my specific culture and concurrently I embrace the common society. Religion, food, and family define me as a Jew. Language, clothing, and even politics primarily classify me as Canadian. While Judaism doesn't define me –it has an impact on every action I take – whether it's a life altering decision or a personal response to an essay question. My relationship with Judaism goes beyond my participation in the Jewish community; it even goes beyond my relationship with G-d.

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My Judaism is an understanding I have with myself. A consideration outlined by Jewish law but interpreted as I see fit.

Two thousand years ago a man told Hillel that he would convert to Judaism if Hillel could teach him the whole of the Torah in the time he could balance on one leg. Hillel replied, "What is hateful to yourself, do not to your neighbor. That is the whole of the Torah; the rest is just commentary. Go and study it."

People like to make Judaism into a confusing and complicated set of laws, and rules and ideas – but in essence it is simply teaching us to treat others as we ourselves would like to be treated. The rest is just an explanation of how we can best do this - how to respect our neighbors and our friends, our families and ourselves. With this in mind, I think that Judaism does play a major role in my life. I am not perfect, not even close – but I like to think that I treat others with respect and deference. Judaism (perhaps indirectly through my parents) has thought me that even in the most extreme cases I must first think, "How would I like to be treated."

Life as a Jew is not always easy, (there's the understatement of the century). Persecuted since the time of Abraham, Jews have struggled to maintain their existence. Even today Anti-Semitism is rampant and the case against Israel is raging. There is no doubt in my mind that not being a Jew would have its perks. No kosher, no Pesach, no differed Saturday morning exams, no lengthy explanations for this that and everything else. But there would also be no history, no holidays, no candlesticks to pass on from one

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generation to the next, no Bar-Mitzvahs, no “Mazel-Tovs,” no bagels with cream cheese and lox, no tradition.

We have a 3x3ft chanukiah sitting in my kitchen window come Chanukah each year. It came from the synagogue in Vegreville Alberta, where my father and grandparents used to live. We drink a glass of wine (or grape juice as the case may be) from silver goblets every Friday – they were my grandmother’s, now they are my mom’s. The challah cover that my parents use came from Israel – I hope that one day I will use it in my own home. Judaism is about tradition. For these traditions I am willing to withstand persecution. When I was small our family used to dance after dinner on Fridays. It sounds silly now, but my sister and I would choose a record, my Dad would put it on, and then my mom, my dad, my sister, even my little brother and I would dance – sometimes in pairs, sometimes the hora, sometimes a little rock n’ roll or in special instances to the Beach Boys. But that tradition, while not typically “Jewish” was my favorite. Some day, I hope that I too will sit down to a chicken dinner with my family and follow it up with a little dancing and maybe even a new tradition of our own. I am not simply willing to withstand hardship but am prepared to go further, I am prepared to engage in a lifelong battle against it in order for my children to experience these Jewish traditions.

I have always been an active member of the Jewish community. I attended Bialik Hebrew Day School in Toronto as a preschooler and then moved to the Calgary Jewish Academy in the second grade. Public school would have been a little less expensive to say the least, but my parents thought it was worth it – I think they were right. I made the

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most of my Hebrew School experience. I sat on student council, on every sports team, made an effort to learn as much Hebrew as I could.

Camp Hatikvah became my summer home and to this day I am a staff member at the most beautiful camp in the world. I can only hope to give back to the camp as much as I received from it, in the way of providing other kids with the opportunity to have the best summers of their lives in a Jewish environment.

BBYO provided me with the leadership opportunity of a life time. First as a member in training, then as chapter vice-president and president, and finally as regional president, B'nai B'rith kept me in touch with my Judaism throughout my high school years when Jewish schooling was no longer an option. Now as a Hillel member, I am becoming in touch with the Jewish community in Edmonton. Meeting new people, creating new bonds and becoming involved with a new community.

My relationship with Judaism, while not always smooth sailing, has always been a good one. I am proud to be a Jew. What may have seemed like a loaded question is simple: I am a Jew by blood; by tradition; by destiny; but mostly by choice. I choose to be a Jew not because it is the best option for me but because in truth it is the only option. Judaism is not just a religion it is way of life and no other way of life could make me happier, brighter, more prosperous, or prouder.