

A Nice Jewish Girl

I was born Jewish.

This is quite a different statement than I would be making if I said I was born Presbyterian or Methodist or Baptist. To be born Jewish is to be born into a history - a culture - a tradition - ethnicity.

As a child I did not know that – I didn't learn it as a young woman growing up in a Jewish family - or as a wife and mother raising my children in the temple.

I felt real connectedness to Judaism only after a long and painful religious crisis -- only after I became a Unitarian Universalist and began training for the UU ministry in a Christian seminary, did I come to understand my Jewishness in a very real way.

I am sad that did not happen within the confines of my family of origin, or the institutions available to a small-town Jewish girl.

That is not the subject for today—

But I do want to caution liberal parents - who, in an effort to not force religion on their children, are in fact denying them substance, stability, and a frame of reference in which to make moral and ethical decisions.

Although my family of origin affirmed their Jewishness, they did not practice it much beyond a twice a year visit to the temple on the High Holy Days.

And, even though my grandfather was a rabbi, the culture and tradition were not passed on to my generation.

The holiest day in the Jewish calendar is the sabbath - shabbat - symbolic of the creation of the world.

The holiest place in all of Judaism is the home. My family did not observe the sabbath, nor, save occasional lighting of the Hanukkah candles, was there any religious observance in our home.

Therefore, what I share with you today comes, not from my own experience, but rather from study -- reading -- and the sharing of others.

I feel sad and a bit angry about that, but what is - is.

Judaism, a religion some 40 centuries old - covering nearly two-thirds of the recorded history of humankind has had many changes throughout its long history - changes induced both from within and without.

There are enough different ways of being Jewish that it is said that if you get two Jews together you have three opinions

Today, I will simply, with large strokes - draw a most general picture --

The hallmark of Judaism is monotheism -- the watchword of the faith is "sh'ma yisroel adonoy elohenu adonoy echod" -- "Hear O Israel, the lord our God, the lord is one."

In addition to monotheism, there is the idea of chosenness --

A mixed blessing.

Chosenness, a sense of having been specifically selected by God for a mission of holiness.

This chosenness involves responsibility -- an ethical concern -- a need to live up to this honor.

At the same time, there is some uncertainty about how much of an honor it is.

Some consider chosenness a burden -- some have even suggested that the only reason the Jews were chosen was because everyone else was asked and said, "No." One Jewish martyr was said to have addressed God: "Master of the universe, next time, please choose someone else."

Another major characteristic of Judaism is a profound attachment to the land -- this is not an easy thing for many non-Jews to understand -- the longing for the homeland during those periods of exile.

As the psalmist wrote: (ps 137)

How shall we sing the lord's song
In a foreign land
If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,
Let my right hand forget her cunning.
Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,
if I remember thee not;
If I set not Jerusalem above my chiefest joy.

Jewish liturgy and longing have centered on the land through all the stages of Jewish history -- thus, much of the misunderstanding and pain centered around Israel today.

In addition to chosenness and love for the land, one cannot speak about Judaism without speaking about light.

It is written -- Leviticus, chapter 24, verse 2:

"Command the children of Israel that they bring unto thee pure olive oil beaten for the light, to cause a light to burn continually."

Here, the writer of Leviticus has summed up in one verse the essence of Judaism.

The Jew is to be a light -- seeing where there is darkness -- spreading light.

The covenant between God and the Israelites was a covenant with all humankind:

"I have given you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations." (Isaiah 42:6)

This became very personal to me at my ordination when Eric Friedland, my beloved Jewish professor spoke to ease the concerns of my family, when he said "there are many ways to be a light.

"Joan has chosen the Unitarian Universalist ministry. Celebrate that."

I was raised in the ultra-reformed tradition. I didn't know an Orthodox or Conservative Jew and was unaware of the Reconstructionist and Humanist movement until I went to seminary.

The Orthodox Jew is said to put a "hedge" or a "fence" around the Torah -- the Law-- believing that if one sets a limit inside, the potential - the chance of wrong doing is lessened.

If I have a fence around my yard, I am less likely to intrude into yours.

Christian misinterpreters of Judaism read Paul (himself a Jew converted to Christianity) and assume the Law to be impossible to follow.

In fact it is!

There are 613 commandments plus numerous rules and regulations derived from the commandments and included in the Talmud - the collection of writings on Jewish law and tradition.

It is impossible to go through life without disobeying the Law.

This is taken so seriously that the rabbis say that if even one person obeys all 613 commandments for even one day, the messiah will come.

Nevertheless, Paul's conception of the law was completely alien to the Jewish mind, and would have been alien to Jesus himself.

The Orthodox Jew does not consider the law to be a hardship, but rather a blessing – the will of God, and for the religious person to obey God's will is the goal of life.

To the Orthodox Jew, it is a mitzvah (commandment) a privilege to study the law, and he devotes his life to this pursuit.

It is appropriate here to say "he", for study of the law was not available to women.

Isaac Bashevis Singer wrote in "Yentle, The Yeshiva Boy":

"She had proved so apt a pupil that her father used to say: "Yentle -- you have the soul of a man."

"So, why was I born a woman?"

"Even heaven makes mistakes."

The Conservative Jew believes that the Orthodox way of thinking is right --

The bible is true and the law should be obeyed --

However, they have concluded that is impossible in the modern world, and so have compromised.

The extent of the compromise varies depending upon the mindset of the rabbi and the congregation.

The reform Jews, with a more contemporary religious practice take their clue from Exodus --

from the 10 commandments --

the foundation of Judaism's ethical code.

Judaism is not based on belief alone-- if it also based on action.

Not just yes-saying, but also yes-doing. Many Jews, not raised within the temple or synagogue, and without religious practice in the home, feel their Judaism in a cultural way. Jews like Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, Theodore Hertzl.

The essence of this belief and action was expressed by Rabbi Hillel, a generation before the birth of Jesus.

When asked by a skeptic, seeking to mock Judaism, to explain the faith while standing on one foot, Hillel replied;

"What thou wouldst not have others do unto thee, do not do unto others. All the rest of the law is commentary to this."

Thus, did Hillel formulate the rule of life which is known as the Golden Rule.

And so it is that all of Jewish observances is symbolic and commentary on one major theme ---

To be a light --

To create a better world in which to live.

The early models for this were the Hebrew prophets, called "the most disturbing people who ever lived."

They redefined God, humanity, temple, slavery, and property.

The rabbis continued this process, centering, as did the prophets before them, on three constants:

Unity, freedom and compassion.

They spoke out against social injustice, corruption, inhumanity.

Their religion became the basis for their ethics.

And so to be a Jew

is not to worship in the temple or synagogue,

or to refrain from eating the product of the pig or shellfish --

it is not to be circumcised

or fast on the day of atonement.

It is to be a light.

This is for me, the junction where Judaism meets Unitarian Universalism.

Our early foreparents were not called prophets, but they indeed were.

Unitarians and Universalists have spoken their minds and their hearts -- have railed against injustice -- and have been burned at the stake, scorned, ridiculed, just like the Hebrew prophets of old --

Together UU's and Jews have stood in the forefront of causes for social justice.

Working for a living expression of their religious commitment.

Of course we have not always succeeded.

of course we fall back -

get off course.

lose our direction.

The behavior of most religious adherents falls short of their belief --

But both Unitarian Universalists and Jews have a powerful vision -- a history to be proud of and purposes worth continuing to strive for.

Jews and UU's also share many theological positions.

In addition to God being one, both believe in the intrinsic goodness of the human being, born not into sin, but into goodness and holiness.

We both recognize that evil exists, but unlike those Christians whose understanding is that we are born into sin, UU's and Jews recognize the human potential to choose good over evil.

Neither the Unitarian Universalist nor the Jew has a clear understanding of life after death.

It is life here on earth that matters.

Both religions cover the spectrum of theological diversity. Both include atheists, agnostics, theists and humanists.

So far, I have said little about Jesus since it really is a non-issue.

But since the foundation of both Unitarianism and Universalism is Christianity, and since we so often hear that the major difference between Judaism and Christianity is the belief in Jesus, I feel I should at least open it up for discussion.

In the middle of the 19th century, James Freeman Clark formulated the Unitarian Statement of faith in five points:

The fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, leadership of Jesus, salvation by character, and progress of mankind onward and upward forever.

That statement remained part of Unitarian theology, and was taught in Unitarian religious school well into this century.

In 1916. Rabbi Stephen Weis responded to this. He said:

"Judaism too believes in the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, salvation by character.

As to the leadership of Jesus, Jews are not blind to the radiance of that personality. To turn our back upon it, if we could, would be a stupid disavowal of our best. He is our own. He belongs in the eternal order of the Jewish prophets..."

Rabbi Wise said, as have so many rabbis through the ages, when asked what they think of Jesus; "he is my brother."

While many Unitarian Universalists see Jesus as a strong force in the development of Christianity, few consider him divine -- unfortunately, seldom do they experience the Jewish feeling of being of the same family.

So, why did I leave?

Why not the rabbinate rather than the UU ministry.

Three reasons ...

First, my understanding of the God of the Hebrew is anthropomorphic, supernatural, male -- yahwah of the Hebrew scripture.

This God of my childhood felt to me intrusive, unbelievable.

Even though my concept of the divine has evolved -- this anthropomorphic, supernatural male God is to me the God of the Shema. The God I rejected.

Neither could I express myself as a humanistic Jew. To me this is contrary to the basic precept of the faith --

When I could no longer say the shema with integrity -- I felt I could no longer call myself a Jew.

Secondly, I am a woman. I cannot be part of a religion that discredits my person because I am a woman.

The picture of woman in Judiac law can best be summarized as that of a legal non-person.

This has led to a religion that is patriarchal in its very origins.

Thirdly, and most profoundly, I am a Unitarian Universalism, because as a UU I can be the kind of Jew I want to be, and yet am not limited to Judaism.

Perhaps, given the modeling of the humanistic Jew, I could learn to accept Judaism without the Old Testament God. Perhaps with the support of the many feminists within Judaism, I could work from within to reform the patriarchal structure.

But – even if I could jump both of those hurdles back into Judaism, I could never leave the basic UU principle that all religions contain truth and beauty, and the freedom within our UU community to search for those truths.

To me, to be Jew is to be exclusive.

To be a Jewish Unitarian Universalist allows me to be inclusive.

William Ellery Channing said it for me:

"I take cheerfully the name of Unitarian (Universalist), not because I wish to regard myself as belonging to any sect, but to the community of free minds, and lovers of truth."

I know from experience how vital to wholeness, is the ability to name and claim our roots.

I cherish what being Jewish allows me:

rootedness--

compelling passion to make the world a better place -

a history --- tradition --- vocabulary

a connectedness to a very old past,

a will to survive,

but I don't have to give any of that up.

As a Unitarian Universalist I am free to honor all religious traditions without negating my own.

I invite you -- to borrow from my tradition --- and yours -- all that is good and fine and noble.

Know your tradition --

It is a part of who you are --

Value it -- affirm it.

And together - all of us --- bringing together the truths we have come to know -- living the values we have come to believe, can indeed make the world a better place.

More human.

Filled with light.

Shalom,