

# THE STRUGGLE OF BEING JEWISH

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*Patrilineal Jews are a minority within a minority. As individuals born to Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers, they may identify as Jewish but have questionable status within the greater Jewish community. Those who carry multiple identities and straddle the boundaries of communities may have to choose between their values and lifestyle, and access to the resources and support of community involvement. This narrative explores the challenges faced by patrilineal Jews from the perspective of values-based decision making. The author shares the story of her personal search for a place in the Jewish community.*

## Introduction

I am a social worker. I chose this profession because of its focus on values such as equality, opportunity, social justice, human and civil rights, and the importance of human relationships (NASW, 2008). The complexities inherent in acknowledging and engaging the true meaning of these values, and others, frame much of my professional thinking as I work with clients and systems. Questions about disparities, status, power, and relationships often come up in the course of my studies and practice. I am frequently challenged by my clients, my colleagues, and my community to make decisions based on these values, choices that aren't always easy or straightforward in the face of limited resources and competing interests.

Although I have struggled with being transparent and consistent about my values, the challenge was somewhat academic to me until just a few years ago. I am a white, Jewish woman who was born into an upper-middle-class American family. Although my family has had its fair share of struggles, including divorce, substance abuse, and mental illness, I have always benefitted from the social, financial, and educational privileges available to me by virtue of my skin color and the resources of my family. For much of my life, I considered "white America" to be my community, and I never questioned my place in that community. I didn't struggle with my values on a personal level, as they weren't often challenged. That all changed once I

began to explore and expand my Jewish identity.

I have struggled greatly with what it means to be Jewish, and what makes me a Jew. The concept of the struggle is central to Jewish culture and history; the Hebrew word *Israel* can be translated as "one who struggles with G-d." This word, which is often used to describe the Jewish people, reflects the importance of struggling with one's beliefs, relationships, and communities. Though it isn't always easy, the process of struggling reflects an engagement with—and respect for—the issue at hand, and may be more valuable than the final answer (if one can be found).

My struggle with Judaism was not about personal ambivalence or difficult experiences in Hebrew school as a child. Rather, it was framed by *halakha*, or Jewish law, and a disagreement within the American Jewish community about that law. I was born to a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother. According to traditional interpretations of *halakha*, a Jew is someone who was born of a Jewish mother, or has converted under the guidance of a Rabbi (Telushkin, 1991). In the early 1980s, the Reform and Reconstructionist movements (the largest and smallest of the four main Jewish denominations in the United States) decided to recognize patrilineal descent, to honor the Jewish status of those who were born to Jewish fathers (but not Jewish mothers), raised as Jews, and carry a Jewish identity (CCAR, 1983; Goldstein, 2001). The Orthodox and Conservative Jewish communities in the United States, as well as

the State of Israel, do not agree with this decision. (Although Israel recognizes freedom of religion, it is a Jewish state, and the Chief Rabbinate has authority over issues such as marriages, burials, and the Jewish status of immigrants.)

For years, I understood my personal challenges with Judaism and patrilineal descent as just that: personal challenges. As I struggled with what it meant to have a Jewish identity, but not necessarily Jewish status, I saw it as a disagreement between me and Judaism, between me and Jewish law. It was something I needed to work out for myself. My perspective on this issue shifted, and became much clearer, when I moved from seeing it as a personal problem to truly experiencing it as a question of values, with implications for others beyond me, including not only Jews, but potentially those outside of the Jewish community.

#### **Patrilineal Jews:**

##### **A Minority within a Minority**

All communities have boundaries: ethnic, religious, racial, social, and sexual lines in the sand that determine who is in and who is out, who gets access to the benefits of belonging, and who doesn't. These boundaries are useful, even crucial, in helping individuals develop identities and connections and allowing cultural groups to share and preserve beliefs and practices. But what of those who don't neatly fit within the group, or who have roots or connections in more than one group, but no firm footing in either? What about those who identify with a community, but aren't recognized or welcomed by the gatekeepers? Issues of majority and minority identities and status arise frequently in the world of social work. They are complex and challenging, as minority communities who have experienced discrimination and persecution often in turn oppress or reject others.

Individuals who identify as biracial, bisexual, or transgender straddle the line between majority and minority cultures and, in some cases, may be able to pass as members of the majority. Despite the potential benefits of "passing," doing so may leave one feeling inauthentic, alienated, and

disconnected. Furthermore, this potential connection to the majority culture can block access to the minority group, to the supports and relationships that sustain individuals as they struggle with the micro-oppressions, discriminations, and challenges of living with a minority identity. Patrilineal Jews struggle with these very questions; as with many American Jews, they can choose to pass as "generic American," or to they can choose to fully embrace and live their Jewish identities. But what does it mean to embrace an identity when the gatekeepers of the community don't necessarily embrace you?

Patrilineal Jews represent a unique group within the history of Judaism—they are, perhaps, the only Jews to be raised from birth with a Jewish identity, but with questionable Jewish status. Those born of Jewish mothers have Jewish status, regardless of their identity, and those born to non-Jewish parents have neither or, at the very least, no presumption of Jewish status. Thus, patrilineal Jews may find themselves in the borderland experienced by many bi-ethnic individuals (Dhooper, 2003), struggling to create an authentic identity and find a community that reflects and accepts their unique heritage and perspective. These tasks may be especially difficult for those individuals who identify as belonging to both the majority and minority cultures.

For example, many patrilineal Jews carry the Jewish last names of their fathers (Walker, 2002) or stereotypically Jewish features, and thus may be perceived as Jews. However, being "shoved into one of the existing monoracial categories...does not mean that the person is accepted into that group" (Dhooper, 2003, p. 23). Thus, these individuals may be subject to anti-Semitism; however, as children of non-Jewish mothers, they may also be rejected by the Jewish community. These barriers make the task of solidifying an identity and finding authentic connections and a welcoming community even harder, if not impossible.

Yet the challenges go beyond identity and relationship formation. As with many minority groups, relationships and connections can strengthen one's identity through positive experiences, and also bolster individuals

against the psychological and emotional challenges of being a part of a minority group that carries with it a long history of persecution, as well as the current challenges of anti-Semitism. In addition, there are a number of concrete ways in which membership in a Jewish community is necessary for creating and living a Jewish life.

Community is central to Jewish life. Much of Jewish culture and observance involves, and often requires, engagement with other Jews. Unlike other religions, one cannot marry, worship, mourn, or celebrate holidays alone: fellow Jews must be present. Yet Jews throughout the United States, and throughout the world, can hardly agree on anything, including who is a Jew (Hirsch & Reinman, 2002; Hyman, 1998). What does it mean to be part of a community that can't agree on what it means to be part of that community? What does it mean to be a Jew in a world where there is such strong disagreement about who is a Jew? These questions play out in very concrete ways in Jewish life.

For example, many synagogues do not welcome non-Jews as members. This issue of communal access expands to almost every aspect of the Jewish community, including day schools (Lyll, 2009), youth groups (Sweifach, 2005), and other organizations (such as Jewish cemeteries). Many Rabbis will not conduct weddings or other lifecycle events, including brises (ritual circumcisions), bar or bat mitzvahs, or burials for interfaith families. Leading an engaged, holistic, and supported Jewish life can be virtually impossible for patrilineal Jews who do not have Jewish status.

Patrilineal Jews are truly caught in the middle, a minority within a minority, capable of passing within both cultures but not quite belonging in either. They may be seen as not Jewish, a potentially painful denial of their identity. Alternately, others may assume these individuals are Jewish, and respond in any number of ways, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively. Yet patrilineal Jews may not be welcomed in the Jewish community—another challenge to their identity and heritage—and a denial of the interpersonal and cultural support that is so important for

individuals who identify as part of a minority group.

There are those who would say that there is a simple solution to this problem: patrilineal Jews can convert to Judaism. Yet this option is complicated and nuanced. First, when individuals convert, the expectation is that they are willing to adopt the values and practices of the Rabbi (and community) with whom they converted. For example, an Orthodox conversion would involve not only the actual conversion ceremony, but a willingness to live an observant lifestyle and participate in the life of the community. Furthermore, conversions are performed under the guidance of Rabbis, and many Rabbis who are conservative (for example, part of the Conservative or Orthodox movements) may not recognize the authority of more progressive or liberal Rabbis. Thus, conversions performed by Reform, Reconstructionist, or nonaffiliated Rabbis would likely not be considered valid in more conservative communities. These disagreements over power and authority would not pose a challenge for all individuals, but those who want to convert with a more liberal Rabbi *and* have status within the greater Jewish community are caught in a terrible bind. Having to choose between one's values and lifestyle and access to resources and support is a painful dilemma.

In addition to the logistical issues inherent in a conversion, one must also consider the meaning behind the conversion process: leaving behind one's old religious (and perhaps cultural) identity in order to adopt a new one. This may make sense for those who are actively seeking this change, but what does it mean for patrilineal Jews, who already carry a Jewish identity? Being asked to discard the identity they are trying to solidify, as well as their Jewish and non-Jewish heritage and family, can be a difficult and demeaning experience; certainly not the way most individuals imagine finding themselves and entering a community.

Patrilineal Jews may enjoy both the blessings and challenges of a Jewish identity, without the psychological and communal benefits of Jewish status. These issues have been a part of my life, and this is my story.

### My Story

I was raised in a secular home, with generic Jewish and Christian holiday celebrations – Christmas trees set up next to *menorahs*, without any spiritual or religious significance. However, I wanted more spiritual and religious connections, even at a young age, although it would be years before I would realize what I was looking for. Perhaps it was this longing that left me feeling so uncertain about my Jewishness. This confusion manifested in a number of relatively insignificant experiences which have nonetheless remained in my memory. In the fourth grade, we studied the Holocaust. I remember struggling with what it meant to be the daughter of a German Jew, to have a non-Jewish mother, and the relatively Aryan features of straight blonde hair and blue eyes. I remember wondering if those traits and my mother would have saved me (I would soon find out that they wouldn't have).

In high school, I went on a student trip to Europe. I was to meet the other students at the airport. As I introduced myself, three young women looked up from a list they were studying. "Funny," one of them said, "you don't look Jewish." That was the first time I heard this, but certainly not the last. I was baffled. I didn't know what to say, and I have no memory of what I did say. I soon learned that all three of these women were Jewish, and had independently, and then together, been studying the list of participants' names in order to determine who else was Jewish. My name put me on the "Jew list."

Fortunately, the question of my Jewishness didn't become much of an issue during the summer, but it did introduce me to something which I continued to encounter: the intersection between how others saw me based on my looks and my name, and how I saw myself, based on my fears, my desires, my knowledge, and my family.

These questions and others moved in and out of my awareness over the years, as I attended my cousins' bar and bat mitzvahs, through college when I took courses in a variety of religious traditions, to my decision to write my master's thesis on clinical work with Jewish clients. Through all of this, I

struggled with the idea of being "half-Jewish," as I had often thought of myself. Yet as I became more immersed in, and identified with, the Jewish faith, teachings, and community, I was concerned by the idea that one is either Jewish or not; there is no such thing as a "half-Jew." This made sense to me, but it was also quite painful.

### Exploring My Heritage, Seeking My Identity

During this time, I started exploring my family history. My paternal grandparents are both descendants of German Jews who came to the United States in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The family followed a fairly common pattern of assimilation, abandoning religious practice, but never dropping their Jewish identity and cultural connections.

My mother's background is more diverse. Her father was from a Protestant family, branches of which can be traced back to Virginia in the 1600s. My grandfather, who I never knew, was a soldier stationed in Italy during World War II, where he met my grandmother.

My maternal grandmother, Leda, grew up in Mantova, a town in Northern Italy that was more Communist than Catholic and tried to help its Jews during the war. Her father wrote an anti-Fascist political newsletter and was frequently harassed by Mussolini's Blackshirts, who forced him to drink castor oil. The family suffered during the war years, and when my grandmother and her soldier moved to the United States in 1946, they tried to leave the war and all of its associations, including religion, behind them.

Leda's religious background was never clear to me, and as I started asking and listening, I learned that she had never cared much for the Church, and that she hadn't even been baptized until late in adolescence. My grandmother told me about a diamond pendant—a 6-pointed star—that had been in the family, but was lost when soldiers came to the family home and made them turn over all of their valuables. Finally, my grandmother also talked about her tutor and her friends, who were taken away to camps during the war.

These details raised a number of questions for me: was it common for Italians to be baptized so late in life? Would the family have been harassed by the soldiers if they weren't Jewish? Was it common for non-Jewish children to have Jewish tutors and friends at that time in Italy? I started asking about this history, and in the course of my questioning, my father (who was long divorced from my mother) casually mentioned that Leda had once told him that her father—my great-grandfather—was Jewish. I was shocked. I had never heard anything about any Jews on my mother's side of the family. I asked my mother, but she was as surprised as I was. We struggled with similar questions: What about Leda's mother? Was she Jewish? If not, how common was it for Jews to marry Catholics in Italy around the turn of the century? I asked Leda about it, but she adamantly denied any Jewish history at all, which only piqued my interest. Why was she denying it now? What was she hiding?

For the next several months, I continued to research my family history. My sister and I hired a professional genealogist. She found nothing. I searched on websites, and found books about Italian Jews, but I couldn't find any useful information. I was feeling increasingly frustrated. I was sure that if I could just figure out if I was really Jewish or not, the next step in my path would become clear to me.

Meanwhile, I joined a synagogue, enrolled in Hebrew classes, and continued my Jewish studies. As I became more connected to, and identified with, the Jewish community, I became more determined than ever to get to the bottom of my family history. I continued to call my grandmother, hopeful that I would learn the truth. Throughout our conversations, she would move in and out of Italian and English, so my mother would interpret. One night, I started by asking if my grandmother ever lit candles on Friday night when she was a child in Italy. She said they did, that they would clean the house on Thursday and light candles on Friday. She retold stories about the family: painful details about the soldiers and the castor oil, about her friends and tutor who were taken away to the camps, of being warned not to go

to a meeting of a resistance group she planned on attending, only to learn later that everyone at the meeting had been killed.

Based on what she told me, I was sure we were Jewish. When I told her as much, she responded with silence before saying, "Rosebud, don't ever tell anyone that."

I suppose I should have felt happy to finally know the truth, but instead I hung up the phone and cried. I felt so sad for my grandmother, for the hatred and danger she had experienced, and I was confused for myself. I tried to tell myself that I had the proof I needed to decide that I was Jewish. In the back of my mind, I realized that she had never said we were Jewish, and I hadn't directly asked. I was scared of hearing her denial. But I decided not to dwell on that. I wanted to be Jewish, and I took her words as enough. Looking back, I wish I had decided to struggle with it more, rather than making a decision, but I didn't.

### Creating a Jewish Life

Instead I went to my Rabbi about a ritual of some sort. We settled on a *mikveh*, or ritual immersion, and an adult *bat mitzvah* ceremony. The ceremonies were fairly unremarkable, and I remember few details. I can't remember if I felt more Jewish afterwards, but, in my mind, that confusing and painful chapter of my life was over. I was done struggling with *halakha*, and I could get on with the important work of finding a community and a connection with G-d.

Boy, was I wrong.

Soon after that, I moved back to the East Coast to live with Josh, the man who would soon become my husband. He was raised with a strong Jewish education, and we worked together to create our own Jewish home, one that would feel comfortable for both of us. We joined a Reconstructionist synagogue. Even though I felt conspicuous and awkward as I struggled through the prayers and songs and tried not to make it obvious that I was reading the transliterations rather than the Hebrew, I enjoyed the services. I remember the first night we made *Shabbat* dinner together, with a braided *challah* loaf on a glass platter that Josh's grandmother had given us.

As we said the *Kiddush* blessing over the wine, I burst into tears.

Life moved on for Josh and me. I finished graduate school, and we began planning our wedding. Josh and I struggled through each word of our *ketubah*, our wedding contract, creating a beautiful text that combined traditional and modern wording, reflecting our hopes and dreams for the marriage and home we would create together. In 2003, we were married under a *chuppah* by our Rabbi, surrounded by family and friends who sang the *sheva b'rachot*, or wedding blessings, for us as we walked down the aisle. We continued to build a Jewish home, deepen our Jewish knowledge, participate in our synagogue, and grow in our observance. The issue of my heritage moved to the back of my mind. I felt like I was Jewish.

#### A Pivotal Trip

In the summer of 2006, Josh and I decided to travel to Israel and Italy: Israel because I had never been and wanted to go, and Italy because we both loved the country, and because I wanted to meet my mother's cousins for the first time. In addition to meeting family, I also hoped to get more information about my ancestors. Were there any records left? Could I find their tombstones in a local cemetery? Could I learn anything more about the mystery of my family? Although I had tried to tell myself that everything that had happened—the phone call with my grandmother, the *mikveh* and my adult *bat mitzvah*—made me really Jewish, I wasn't sure. As Josh and I started to talk about having a family and how we would raise our children, I realized that as the mother, my Jewish status had serious implications for our children. I needed to know.

Travelling through Israel was incredibly meaningful for me. I had never before been in a place where everyone was Jewish. It didn't really hit me at first. I remember eating falafel with Josh on a park bench in Jerusalem. I started to play "Who is a Jew," the same game of guessing who is Jewish and who isn't that I had been on the receiving end of so many years before. I had barely started when Josh reminded me that they were all Jewish. It was

a powerful moment when I realized that none of the people on the street would ask why I don't eat milk and meat together, and none of them would wish me a Merry Christmas. Perhaps most importantly, they would understand why it meant so much to me to be in Israel, surrounded by other Jews, even if I didn't know them and didn't have much more in common with them than being Jewish. But was I really Jewish? And who was to decide?

I remember standing at the Valley of the Communities at *Yad Vashem*, the Holocaust museum. This large outdoor exhibit memorializes the Jewish communities throughout the world which were destroyed during the Holocaust. I found the names of towns that my family members were from, including Mantova, Italy, and Treuchtlingen, Germany. I struggled with many emotions standing at that wall; I felt so connected to the Jewish community and history, but I also felt as though I was on the outside, looking in. These towns were part of my heritage and history, and their stories were my story, but did I have the right to really claim them as my own?

After Israel we went to Italy, where we met my mother's family. They were lovely and warm, welcoming and interested. They weren't put off by my inquiries about our family's Jewish history, and took us to the local Jewish cemetery and the only synagogue left in town. We met the caretakers (the only Jews still living there), and they took us on a tour of what was once the Mantova ghetto. My cousins showed me where my grandmother grew up, a little house down the street from a church. We saw the porch where my great-grandmother would sit each Sunday morning as she heckled her neighbors on their way to mass, yelling: "What are you listening to that quack for? He can't save you any more than I can!"

Meeting my family and seeing where they came from was a wonderful experience, but I came away from the trip feeling disappointed that I hadn't found a gravestone with a Star of David on it, or a *menorah* in a closet somewhere. Even before the trip, I had been struggling with my Jewish status (was my mother really Jewish or not?), and my fantasies

of finding some external validation increased during our time in Israel. I felt so connected to the land, to the people, and to the culture that I couldn't imagine that I might need a conversion in order to be officially Jewish. I just knew that my mother had to be Jewish, and I just knew that I was going to find that proof in Italy. But then I didn't find it, so I had to figure out what that meant for me and my family.

### A Search for Acceptance

In the months following the trip, I found myself really struggling, more than I had expected, with my Jewish identity and status. So, I did what any good *yekke*, or German Jew, would do. I made a list of all the information I needed to solve this problem of my status, and I set about finding it. I met with Rabbis: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist. I made phone calls and surfed the web. I read every book or article that I could get my hands on. I was sure that I was going to find the answer somewhere.

I didn't know exactly what that answer was, but I imagined someone of some status finally telling me that I was Jewish. This person was likely an Orthodox Rabbi, and I imagined that he would hear me out and agree that although there was no definite proof, it was clear from my grandmother's stories about Stars of David and nose jobs in the family and the way she used to offer me four different breakfasts every morning, despite my insistences that I wasn't hungry, that we were definitely Jewish.

Ha.

After hearing from more than one Orthodox Rabbi that I should continue researching and, if I found nothing, he would be happy to convert me as long as Josh and I agreed to live an Orthodox life and raise our kids in an Orthodox community, I began to feel hopeless and powerless. I remember sitting with Josh on the couch in our living room and sobbing. I felt so connected to the Jewish community, and I wanted so badly to truly be Jewish, but I kept getting hung up on one issue: what made me Jewish? If I wasn't a convert, or born of a Jewish mother, then what made me Jewish, rather than just a Semitophile? I

didn't feel like I could throw thousands of years of Jewish tradition out the window and just call myself a Jew. One of the things I love about Judaism is the recognition of the importance of traditions, and that there have been rules and laws and guiding practices that have sustained Jews through the centuries.

Since that day I have often thought about why it all mattered so much to me. My Rabbi, my husband, and my family all considered me Jewish, so why did I care about the *hechsher*—or seal of approval—of the rest of the Jewish world, including the Orthodox communities, with whom I disagree on so many issues?

There are those who would point to my history, connecting my childhood experiences of growing up in the two different families of my divorced parents, in several cities, and in diverse cultures, to my need for an external validation of my Jewish identity. Perhaps they are right, but I prefer to understand my longings from a position of strength rather than one of deficits. My Jewish practices and beliefs had become such a central part of my identity, lifestyle, and relationships that it was painful to know that there are those in the Jewish world who could, and would, deny my place among them. Furthermore, as I thought about my future children, I didn't want this struggle for them. I wanted them to feel secure and accepted in any Jewish community, not just the one they would grow up in.

Despite my desire for external validation, and my wishes for myself and my children, I knew I wouldn't have an Orthodox conversion. My objections were not related to Orthodox religious practices; I would be willing to increase my level of observance as necessary. My concern about an Orthodox lifestyle had to do with the values; I couldn't support, much less adopt, a lifestyle and community that wouldn't value women, gays, lesbians, and others the same way it values straight men. I couldn't imagine raising my children in a community that wouldn't welcome them entirely as they are, and offer them every opportunity for participation and leadership, regardless of who they are or who they love.

I was torn. On the one hand, I was clear about the values that were important to me

and that I wanted to pass along to my children. Yet there was still a part of me that couldn't help but acknowledge the power of the Orthodox community, that wanted an "authority figure" to really declare me Jewish. That part of me wanted to feel connected, to know for sure who I was and where I belonged. I hadn't yet found that within myself, and was still looking elsewhere for that affirmation.

I had to find some way to deal with the situation. I knew that I could always have a conversion ceremony, either within my own Reconstructionist community or with Reform or Conservative Rabbis, but to be honest, and I hated to say it, those options didn't seem good enough. Those conversions would likely not be accepted by the Orthodox community or the State of Israel and, as I have mentioned before, I hated the idea that there would be those Jews in both the United States and in Israel who would not consider me or my children Jewish. Although I don't agree with their values, and in fact I abhor much of what some of them stand for, they have been endowed with a power to decide who is Jewish and who isn't, especially in Israel. Although I didn't want it to, it mattered to me.

### A Shift in Perspective

I felt lost, so I did what hundreds of fellow neurotic Jews had done before me: I got into therapy. I was lucky enough to work with an amazing woman who is a psychologist and a Reconstructionist Rabbi, and we began the work. I told her of my struggles, of my desire to really be Jewish (whatever that meant), how painful it felt to not know, and to not know how I could find the answer. I felt like I was on the outside of the Jewish community, knowing in my heart that I belonged inside, but not knowing how to enter. Why couldn't I just let go of this need to be accepted by the Orthodox? I felt like a hypocrite, saying that I believed women can and should be Rabbis, seeking the guidance of female Rabbis in therapy and at my synagogue, yet wanting a seal of approval from an Orthodox man.

At one point, we started talking about what I imagined might actually happen if I were to have a conversion with Orthodox Rabbis. I had a strong memory of the men in black hats

and *peyas* (earlocks worn by ultra-Orthodox Jews) that I had seen swaying and praying in front of the Western Wall in Jerusalem that previous summer. I imagined one of them leading my conversion and questioning me about my Jewish practices and knowledge, and then waiting for me outside of a *mikveh*. I didn't feel any comfort in that scenario. Rather, I felt disgusted and repulsed. Who was this man to question me, my faith, and my lifestyle?

From that moment on, I noticed my perspective changing in small, subtle ways. Perhaps it was the way in which these vague questions of identity and status became very concrete when I started thinking about the details. It was one thing to talk about wanting the approval of someone in power, but quite another to imagine what that would really mean. When I thought about converting, I felt myself caring less and less about what the Orthodox community might think. Yet there was still this part of me that wanted to feel "really Jewish," to know that I was just as much a Jew as anyone else. I kept coming back to the same questions: what made me a Jew? What would it take for me to feel truly Jewish? My thoughts vacillated between my strong Jewish identity and my connection to our Jewish community and this need to find the ultimate seal of approval for my Jewish status.

One concept in particular helped me move through that struggle. It was something my therapist shared during a session: the idea of *machloket l'shem shamayim*: an argument for the sake of the heavens, a disagreement that is above earthly matters, that is bigger than politics and power plays, and as such, is worth the painful struggle. I had known that the concept of struggling—with G-d, with each other, and with ourselves—is a fundamental part of Jewish culture, but that intellectual knowledge hadn't really permeated my thoughts and feelings around my own Jewishness. The introduction of this concept in the context of my own struggle resulted in a powerful and nearly instant reframing of the issue: it took me out of my own reality and helped me see the bigger picture, as well as the implications for others.

It was no longer about me being on the outside, fighting to get into Judaism. Instead, I suddenly saw myself as a member of the community, someone on the inside, struggling to make it better. The issue was no longer about me, it was about the values that help shape the Jewish community, and the way in which my situation related to those values. Throughout all of this, I had believed that the Jewish community would be stronger, more durable, more vibrant, and generally better when all members of the community are valued as equals and welcomed to participate fully in every aspect of Jewish life. However, I had never imagined myself playing a role, even a small one, in the struggle to move toward this reality.

As I continued to meditate on the idea of an argument for the sake of the heavens, a struggle for a greater good, I thought about my values and my belief in equality and social justice. I realized that I had a responsibility to make decisions based on those values, rather than on fear or anxiety. All of a sudden, my struggle to really be Jewish was no longer about what or who I wasn't; it was about my commitment to Judaism and to the universal values that were so important to me. During this time, I came across the following passage, from a letter to the editor that Rabbi Harold Kushner sent to the *New Yorker*:

*"In Turow's thoughtful article on capital punishment, he cites Sister Helen Prejean's question 'Ask yourself if you're willing to inject the fatal poison.' My response was 'Yes, I would do it gladly in some of the notorious cases Turow describes.' That is why I am against capital punishment; I don't want to nourish that part of my soul that can enjoy hurting another person"* (2003, p. 7).

Although the details are not relevant to my struggle, the idea is. As much as some part of me would have felt comforted by the blessing of an Orthodox Rabbi, that's not who I wanted to be, nor did it represent the values by which I wanted to live my life. I wanted to

look back on this fork in the road, and know that I had chosen a path congruent with who I wanted to be, and how I wanted to see the Jewish community develop, rather than out of fear of who I wasn't.

### **Conclusion: Moving Forward**

As the question of my Jewish status shifted from a personal struggle to an issue of values, the answer became clear to me. I worked with my Rabbi to create a ceremony of Jewish affirmation, one that met the requirements of a conversion, but would not involve any renunciation of my family history or lineage, as some conversions require. The ceremony was witnessed by three Rabbis; three female Reconstructionist Rabbis. No, this ceremony, this affirmation, this conversion (call it what you wish; the label is not meaningful to me, although the process and the experience are) would not be accepted or acknowledged by Orthodox communities or the State of Israel. To them, I am the daughter of a Jew, and the wife of a Jew, but I am not a Jew. I know this, and I must admit it still bothers me from time to time. However, there was no perfect choice for me, and I do not regret the one I chose.

Just before my affirmation ceremony, I had a conversation with my grandmother Leda in which she casually mentioned that her father was Jewish. She had never acknowledged that before. I asked Leda about her mother, and she said that my great-grandmother was Catholic. Apparently my grandmother grew up attending both temple and church, without taking much of a liking to either. Although I was glad to know the information, having this knowledge didn't really matter much. Whereas I had been previously looking for closure from my grandmother or my history, by the time I heard the truth, I had already found the right path for myself and my family.

I'm not sure if my choice and the outcome of my struggle will ever impact the lives of anyone beyond my immediate family. Nonetheless, the experience broadened my awareness of what it means to be caught between two cultures; neither fully accepted nor fully rejected by either. Having been both judged and validated, I had to find my own way, with the help and support of others, and

the guidance of my values and beliefs. Feeling truly heard by my family, my Rabbi, and my therapist, allowed me to move forward in a process that had previously felt stuck. I have a deeper empathy and respect for my clients who are struggling with similar issues, and a renewed commitment to supporting them in making decisions based on values that sustain and guide them, even in the face of challenging barriers.

Although I didn't always realize it at the time, I was living in and struggling with fundamental questions of values and power. I found myself wanting the approval of those who would only provide it if I espoused their lifestyle and values; values that I did not, and could not, abide by. I was caught in the middle of power and politics: my status, and thus my identity, subject to the preferences of others until I decided to find my own path. As a social worker, I thought I understood those issues. As a Jew and a woman, I have lived them. The difference is immeasurable.

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