

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Zoe Greenberg. I've been a member of KB for about six years and have graduated from KB Sunday school, participated in the KB youth group, and am currently an aide at the Sunday school.

This year at Rosh Hashanah I have chosen to reflect on an event from when I was younger. It has led me to further reflect on how my religious background and my experiences at KB have influenced me. I would like to share the experience event with you.

I'm eight years old and standing in line to get my fruit salad lunch at school. Suddenly my friend behind me taps my shoulder and I turn to him. "What religion are you?" he asks me, trying to make conversation as best an awkward third grader can. "Oh," I reply with my standard answer, "my mom's Christian and my dad's Jewish." It is the truth. It was my religious identity as far as I was concerned. No one else seemed to have a problem with it. "I see," my friend replies, "well do you believe in God?" I know, the question was a little personal to be asking someone in the lunch line but that didn't really occur to me at the time. "No," I answer. I probably should have qualified that answer a little bit considering I had not really thought about the question all that much and it's kind-of a big question. But my answer was an easy end to that conversation about a topic I wasn't really sure about; at least that's what I thought. As I took my usual lunch seat with all my friends a girl came up to me and asked "Do you really not believe in God?" "No," I replied, a little flustered that she had been listening in to my conversation and was now confronting me on the issue. Suddenly three or four of my other friends began asking me; apparently the girl had spread my answer around. By now I was confused and a little upset. Usually I defined myself as half Jewish half Christian and that did the trick. But we had been getting nearer to the division between the macaroni and cheese line and the fruit salad line so my answer was the quickest, simplest answer I could come up with. But my friends kept asking and making a big deal out of my confused answer. I really hadn't defined myself as anything but half Jewish and half Christian before that point, wasn't that a good enough answer? How did this new question come into the picture? Half Jewish and half Christian had always been my religion, period. Now all of a sudden the question had become about my beliefs, too.

As I look back on that day many years ago when my friend questioned me I realize that my religious identity has evolved throughout these years. If I could go back and live that day over, having had the time for thought and the experiences that I have had, there are definitely some things I would change. To start my reply to the question of God, would be more like "Well I haven't really thought about that all that much but I don't know.", I would not let that girl question my beliefs, and I might even choose to avoid the situation entirely by bringing a sandwich instead of buying a fruit salad. And as to the question of my religious identity, my answer would be a little more complicated. I would still include something about my father being raised Jewish and my mother being raised catholic, but I would probably now acknowledge the fact that I am part of a humanistic Jewish congregation.

So, you may ask, how can Judaism and Christianity be so important to me that I would define myself by them when I am not sure whether I believe in God which is clearly a fundamental principle of both religions? My answer is that these religions are important to me not in what they stand for to the majority of the people who believe in them but in what they stand for to me.

I enjoy the culture and morals associated with these religions not necessarily all the beliefs that go along with them.

I define myself by these religions because of all the good they have done for me. Christianity is the reason that I get a week off of school and am given lots of cool gifts in December, pretty neat, huh? But really, Christianity is the reason I get to see my cousins in Illinois for Christmas every year. For this one time a year, everyone gets time to relax and enjoy our family, something that we rarely pull off at any other time. And in terms of the world around me, Christmas time, a time that is about as Christian and theistic as it gets, makes people more friendly and charitable than they are at any other time. Who could ask for a better holiday, really? And how about Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. They mean going to synagogue for a good half a day but they also mean that I get to see all my Jewish family in Atlanta. They mean celebrating my cousins and celebrating what they have accomplished up to that point in their lives. Even if Bar Mitzvahs are supposed to be about becoming responsible to God for your actions, you have to admit there really are not enough times set aside for us to celebrate the people in our lives and Bar Mitzvahs are excellent opportunities to do just that. Where others might see these holidays as a time to celebrate a higher power, I see them as an opportunity to celebrate the people around me.

As you can see from the meaning that I take from those events, my family is very important to me. When I was younger I really enjoyed sitting in the car with my mom asking her “Do you think your family would still love me if I did this” or “Do you think Grandpa would talk to me still if I did that”. I’ll admit, the game was a little strange, but the idea was that family members are the people who always love and accept me no matter what. So it’s important to me that I love and accept my family just as I assume they will do the same for me. Well, accepting my family also means accepting how important their religion is to them. Religion is such a fundamental part of my extended family’s life that I could not imagine them without it. Because of the large part that religion plays in my family member’s lives, it is important to me as well as an opportunity to connect with them and share in their culture.

Though I like Judaism and Christianity as a piece of my family members’ identities, that isn’t enough of a reason to go through the rituals that don’t hold meaning for me that are associated with the religions. These rituals have to have significance to me as a humanist, as well. Christmastime has become a celebration of family and togetherness for me, more than a time to celebrate the birth of Christ. Going to Church means that my Grandpa can show off his family to his church friends. Eating kosher cookies that my Grandma offers me means my Grandma gets a chance to talk to me about her ideals in terms of religious diets and in terms of larger issues. I’ve had a little help from my family here as well. Instead of hours at synagogue on Yom Kippur when I was younger we would spend the morning cleaning the bike path. And, yes, we did get some funny looks at the time and a few people told us not to litter when we were doing just the opposite. But the fundamental idea of helping others rather than engaging in hours of prayer was the part of the holiday that was important to us. For Hanukkah we would often bring menorahs and play dreidel with my Christian cousins in Illinois when we visited them for Christmas. One of the important aspects of Hanukkah to us was celebrating our culture and sharing it with our friends and family. These religious traditions may not have a strong theistic meaning to me but they were the parts of the holidays that meant the most to my family and me. And if you think about it, it’s kind of fun and maybe even

more significant to pick out your favorite and personally most important parts of the different religions to celebrate.

Just as I celebrate being part of this congregation of Humanistic Jews during these high holidays, so too, do I reflect on the joy and comfort that the past year has brought me as a part of my extended family's theistic Jewish and Christian communities. Both KB and my extended family help me explore my own religious views and understand why different people believe in what they do. My religious heritage and my participation in KB have influenced who I am yet I know that I have the power to decide how they will influence me, both today and in the years to come.

Hope you all have a sweet Rosh Hashanah and happy rest of the year.