

My Jewish Identity

I like to compare my family to the family in the movie My Big Fat Greek Wedding. In the film There is a girl named Toula who comes from a big loud Greek family, and they all want her to marry a nice Greek boy and have lots of babies. She meets a guy named Ian and falls in love, but he isn't Greek! He comes from a very small ordinary family, very different from Toula's. They get engaged and the audience watches the two families get to know each other which is very funny. My family is very much like that, except instead of Greek, we are Jewish. My mom's side of the family are all close, loud, German, and Jewish. My dad's side of the family are more distant, quiet, and very not Jewish.

I have been going to Hebrew school since I was about seven or eight years old, and I was always so jealous of my friends who had their Sunday mornings free to watch tv and have playdates. Every Sunday, I would get up early, schlepping down to Synagogue and kvetching all the way.. Looking back, I see how useful those hours of seemingly pointless lessons were. At the time I had no idea how much of Hebrew school was preparing me for my bat mitzvah; I thought all the Hebrew lessons and learning the prayers was just another way for grown ups to torture kids!

When 6th grade came around, it was time to start preparing for my bat mitzvah. I started taking classes with my parents on Sundays and met with the rabbis to discuss dates and torah portions. Picking the date of your bat mitzvah is very important, because it determines which torah portion you are going to read, as each section has a specific date that it is read on. Reading the torah is not just reading a story out loud: there are no vowels, and words have different pitches, so it is like singing. AND you have to sing it in front of the whole congregation, plus all of your family members that are attending. As if that was not enough, you also have to lead the Saturday morning services on your bat mitzvah which entails leading the congregation in different songs and prayers. It's a lot of work and preparation.

Seventh grade was the year of bar and bat mitzvahs. All of my Jewish friends from school, plus my whole hebrew school class were turning 13. The first one I attended was my friend Carmiya's who I've known since we were about six years old. Since she is a few months older than me, her bat mitzvah was in September while I

didn't even turn 13 until February. I was so nervous to see her bat mitzvah, because it would set the bar for that season of bat mitzvahs. What if she was a much better singer than me, or much better at Hebrew or knew more prayers or something? What worried me more was the fact that she went to a much more traditional synagogue than I did. What if I looked stupid at my bat mitzvah because it was so different from hers? However, I went and pretended not to be stressed, and actually ended up having a great time. When I was driving back home with my mom, she started to reminisce about her bat mitzvah and her Hebrew school days at the synagogue that she went to as a child. It was very similar to Carmiya's because it was much more traditional than the one we go to now. I could tell she missed it and I began to worry that I was disappointing my mom by having my bat mitzvah at a synagogue that was so different from what she grew up with. I thought that I was doing it wrong or that there was a right and wrong way to do it.

Over the next few months I continued to prepare for my bat mitzvah, and attend the bar and bat mitzvahs of my various other friends and acquaintances. I slowly started to realize that there was no right or wrong way to have a bat mitzvah, everyone was doing it differently, but each was just as beautiful and meaningful. When it was finally time for my bat mitzvah, I felt confident and ready. Of course I was nervous, but a normal kind of nervous, not an I'm so scared I am going to disappoint my whole family and make them hate me and be embarrassed in front of everyone I know, kind of nervous.

With the realization that there was no wrong way to have a bat mitzvah, came the realization that there was really no wrong way to be Jewish. Everyone approaches Judaism differently and it means something different to every person. I now knew that I was not disappointing anyone by being Jewish the way I felt was right for me, and I think that is what having a bat mitzvah is all about.