WHAT BEING JEWISH MEANS TO ME

It's hard being a professional football player. It's harder still being a Jewish football player.

My road to playing offensive line in the NFL began at East Texas State University where I was the only Jewish student and where there was no Jewish community. I was the object of some proselytizing, often sitting through team prayer meetings before the games. Always, I retained a strong sense of Jewish dignity and pride.

After completing my undergraduate degree, I was signed as a free agent by the Green Bay Packers and spent five exciting years in Wisconsin, upholding the traditions of Vince Lombardi and trying to keep quarterbacks off their backs. The Jewish community of Green Bay, though small, sustained me and helped me survive the isolation of being the only Jew on the team. At pre-game prayer sessions, when my teammates would join hands and recite the Lord's Prayer, I would say my own silent prayer, a Jewish prayer.

As a Dallas Cowboy and member of the Super Bowl championship team of 1992, I got to play for coach Jimmy Johnson and protect the now legendary quarterback Troy Aikman. Being Jewish left me open to a fair amount of good-natured ribbing and kidding, more the by-product of insensitivity than of malice. In the rough and tumble environment of an NFL team, a Jew is an outsider.

Most meaningful to me is Judaism's strong emphasis on family and celebration, passed down to my brother and me by our parents. Among my warmest memories are Passover seders, when family and friends would join together to retell the story of our people's liberation from slavery, or during Hanukkah, our festival of light and freedom, with its beautiful rituals, food, and songs. These holidays and others, and the weekly celebration of the Shabbat, bring us added joy and meaning and help us to renew Judaism and ourselves.

I always knew in my heart that I would marry a Jewish woman with whom I could share my love for Judaism and build a Jewish family. When newcomers move into our neighborhood, Marla and I welcome them into our home for a Shabbat or holiday meal. We also try to share our Jewish traditions with friends who are more distant from Judaism. This is our way of nurturing a sense of community and belonging, tradition and continuity.

Marla and I have recently been blessed with the birth of our first child, Jeri Lauren. As we are her link to the Jewish past, she is our link to the Jewish future.

The American Jewish Committee is proud to present this message, the eleventh in a series, on the meaning of being Jewish today. The Jewish community offers an abundance of exciting intellectual, spiritual, and cultural opportunities that can enrich and enhance one's life. Jewishness can provide a sense of meaning and of belonging, and a connection to the ideals and aspirations of our people.

For further information, call or write us at Dept. JCAD, 165 East 56 Street, New York, New York 10022, Phone (212) 751-4000, ext. 267.

The American Jewish Committee is dedicated to strengthening the Jewish community, enriching the quality of Jewish life, and enhancing democratic values for all.

The American Jewish Committee

Robert S. Rifkind
President

David A. Harris
Executive Director