

WHAT BEING JEWISH MEANS TO ME



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The Jewish sages taught, "Make your home a regular meeting place for scholars; sit eagerly at their feet and drink their words." Being Jewish means many things to me, but none more important to my identity than being part of a tradition of scholarship and learning. Perhaps that is why I became a teacher, seeking to extend that tradition by following the Talmud's observation, "When you teach your son, you teach your son's son."

My father, in fact, was a teacher. He taught high school English in Manchester, New Hampshire -- "a little United Nations," he used to say, populated by old-line Yankees and persons with French-Canadian, Greek, Italian, Lebanese, Armenian, and Polish roots.

Growing up in such a typically American "melting pot," I often wondered what it meant to be a Jew. I gradually came to understand that serious learning was a core Jewish value connecting us with the wisdom of the past.

Our house abounded with books and conversation about ideas; our pantheon was peopled with intellectuals -- our rabbi, Freud, Brandeis, Einstein, and Salk -- whom I admired as following in the footsteps of Isaiah, Hillel, Maimonides, Rashi, and Buber. And so, as I matured, my search for my most authentic self was ineluctably linked to my identity as an intellectual, and that identity was inextricably linked to my sense of myself as a Jew.

For my parents, education was of preeminent importance. I attended Harvard in the mid-1950s, an experience that confirmed everything my parents and my Jewish upbringing had inculcated in me about the joys of learning, even as it provided but a handful of Jewish academic role models. Only when I arrived at Yale Law School, where the faculty included many Jews, was I able to meet Jewish scholars whom I could emulate.

I dearly wish that my father, who had confronted anti-semitism in finding his early teaching positions, had lived long enough to see the installation of Jewish presidents at numerous Ivy League and Big Ten universities. Only during the 1980s did American society come of age in recognizing Jewish scholars as academic leaders. At Dartmouth, as at other American colleges and universities today, the significant texts of the Judaic heritage are studied alongside the classics of Western culture.

By pursuing scholarship and learning, American Jews have preserved their identity, taught their children's children, made their mark on American life, and fortified the covenant between themselves and God.

The American Jewish Committee is proud to present this message, the tenth 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.

This week Jews throughout the world have been celebrating Hannukah, the festival of light and of freedom from tyranny. This is a good time for every Jew to explore his or her ties to the Jewish people and to the Jewish heritage.

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.



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