

Reprinted from *The New York Times*,
Sunday, November 21, 1993

WHAT BEING JEWISH MEANS TO ME



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Despite years of Hebrew school, I was ambivalent about my Jewishness, unsure of its relevance in the contemporary American world. Ironically, it took an experience abroad to put things into perspective. I travelled to Spain as a high-school exchange student. Living with a Catholic family whose only language was Spanish and who knew nothing about Jews or Judaism, I became deeply conscious of my Jewishness.

My first Friday in Barcelona, the Sabbath drew near, and I suddenly wanted to be with other Jews. I managed to find a small synagogue where the traditional melodies of the familiar Sabbath prayers reminded me of home. Sitting there, thinking about the great Jewish community of Spain which ended abruptly with their mass expulsion in 1492, I felt a new sense of identification with my people, our faith and shared history. The first sparks of a positive Jewish identity had been lit.

This past summer I made my first trip to Israel. Some images linger: The family I met in a synagogue in Eilat that welcomed me warmly and lovingly into their home for the Sabbath meal... Lake Kinneret at sunset, proof of the beauty of Israel and the Jewish people's bond to it... A concert violinist on a Jerusalem street corner, recently arrived from Russia and playing for small change, sure that things would improve.

I have gradually developed a deepening awareness of the spiritual possibilities that Judaism offers. I am learning to appreciate the holiness of the Sabbath and its unique power to renew and refresh my spirit.

In an age of cynicism and rootlessness, being Jewish gives my life added meaning. It has strengthened my bonds with family and friends. It constantly challenges me to get involved in the Jewish community and in American society.

For instance, each week, as a volunteer, I tutor five-and-a-half-year-old Steven, who lives in public housing in Washington. At first I didn't realize that this had anything to do with being Jewish. But now I see it does. Tutoring Steven has helped me to see that being Jewish includes a commitment to others. Our tradition teaches that our world is constantly being created, and each of us is God's partner in the process. Helping Steven helps me.

Family, roots, tradition, Israel, holiness, community, compassion, justice. That is what my journey of discovery has taught me. And I am only at the beginning.



The American Jewish Committee

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The American Jewish Committee is proud to present this message, the sixth in a series, on the meaning of being Jewish today. The Jewish community offers an abundant diversity of intellectual, spiritual and cultural opportunities that can enrich and deepen one's life. Jewish living, we believe, provides rootedness in the present and a link to our history and destiny.

For information on a variety of programs and organizations which can help you develop your connection to Jewish life, write or call us at (212) 751-4000, ext. 267.

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