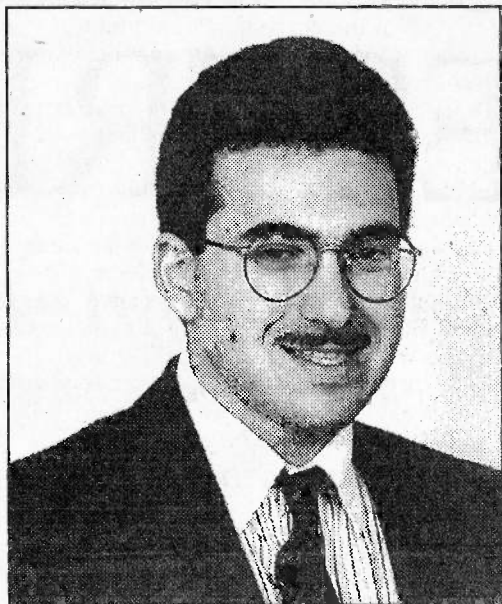


WHAT BEING JEWISH MEANS TO ME



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Class of 1995

Growing up in Minsk, in the former Soviet Union, I knew my parents were Jewish by birth. Beyond that, all I knew about Judaism was that the word "Jew" stamped in my internal passport was going to spoil my life. It was a cause for shame and humiliation.

I learned that lesson in the first grade, when my classmates taunted me with cries of "zhid", the derogatory word for Jew. Distraught, I ran home to my parents. With heavy hearts they explained that a Jew in the Soviet Union was doomed to second-class status in school, at work, in society. In those days, anti-Semitism was everywhere. And to make matters worse, there were no teachers, mentors, or friends who could be positive Jewish role models.

Things began to change in 1987 as many Jews began to emerge from their spiritual hiding places, eager to affirm their long-suppressed Jewishness. One Saturday, out of curiosity, I joined a group of young people who had gathered outside the only synagogue in Minsk, not to pray, but to draw strength from being together. I returned to that gathering many times and, in the process, found I was becoming a Jew.

In 1989 we left Minsk via Italy for the United States. During the four months we spent at the emigres' transit station near Rome, I read everything I could on Israel, the Holocaust and Judaism. My purely ethnic connection was gradually taking on a religious dimension.

Entering college here, I found a gifted teacher and mentor, and, to my great surprise, I was drawn to Jewish studies. Finally, positive Jewish experiences were shaping my Jewish identity. Before I knew what was happening, Jewish learning had become a passion. I began to understand the richness of our heritage. I had fallen in love with Judaism. And last summer, seeing Israel for the first time, I experienced another dimension of being Jewish — the excitement of a modern and ancient Jewish homeland. I have now decided to become a rabbi, to continue learning and then to teach.

Being Jewish means much to me: it means advancing the good of my people by sharing the beauty and depth of Judaism; it is to be involved in tikkun olam, the healing of the world for the betterment of all people; and it is to be a rodef shalom, a pursuer of peace, in a troubled and often violent world.

I am grateful for the precious gift of freedom. As a Jew, I believe that freedom includes the responsibility to preserve my precious heritage and to transmit it -- something my parents and grandparents were not allowed to do. My greatest wish is that I may some day teach my own children the fulfillment of being a Jew.

This message is adapted from the winning essay in a national essay contest for undergraduates on the meaning of being Jewish, sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, and funded by the Susan & Jack Lapin Fund for Jewish Continuity.



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The American Jewish Committee is proud to present this message, the eighth in a series, on the meaning of being Jewish today. The Jewish community offers an abundant diversity of intellectual, spiritual and cultural opportunities. To obtain a copy of the winning essays and other materials on Jewish identity, write or call us at (212) 751-4000, ext. 267.

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Reprinted from *The New York Times*, Wednesday, May 4, 1994