

WHAT BEING JEWISH MEANS TO ME



Ann Roiphe, Writer & Novelist

This Rosh Ha-Shanah, the year 5754 when everything begins again, the sound of the shofar cracks open my heart. Hopeful rumors are rustling in the thicket: Peace?

I was ankle-deep in middle age, wading down the waters of assimilation when I discovered that being Jewish was more than I had ever dreamed. How lucky for me. Now I mark the calendar with the Jewish cycle of celebrations, my table turns with Seder plate, Challah bread, and honey for the New Year. I've learned the whole story. I learned where Chelm, the town of fools, lies on the map. I can tell you wild tales about Jewish gangsters in Chicago and Jewish soldiers in the Czar's army. I expanded my family. Freud and Einstein are cousins of mine, so are Rashi and Maimonides. Once I knew only about Jewish catastrophe, now I can tell a Jewish joke (not so well) and I have seen Torah pointers, cups for Elijah and menorahs made of clay.

I am the same old feminist I always was. I am still a left-of-center, First Amendment, anti-war sort of person. I am the same former field hockey player chasing the ball, socks falling down. But now I have pictures in my mind of the destruction of the Temple, of the exile from Spain, of transport trains. I know the stories of Gluckel from Hameln and Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav. I have seen tomatoes growing in the Negev and can imagine the Baal Shem Tov dancing in the forest. I am no longer the child who asks what has this to do with me. I was proud at Entebbe, my heart skipped beats when the Scuds flew over Tel Aviv. When Russian Jews and Ethiopian Jews arrive at Ben-Gurion Airport, I feel like a child at her birthday party. The survival of Israel, its difficult, quarrelsome, glorious bark, soothes me.

Today I frequently argue with a God whose existence I question, but I think that the Jewish people has a purpose, a destiny, a reason for being, perhaps only in the wonder of our plot, the continuing effort to make us shape up, behave decently, look at ourselves with a moral eye. I am no longer a mere particle of genetic material spinning out a single life span. I have a past, present and future among my people. Am I ever surprised!

This season of Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur is a good time for thinking about what being Jewish means to you. It is a time for every Jew to explore his or her ties to the Jewish people and to the Jewish heritage.

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