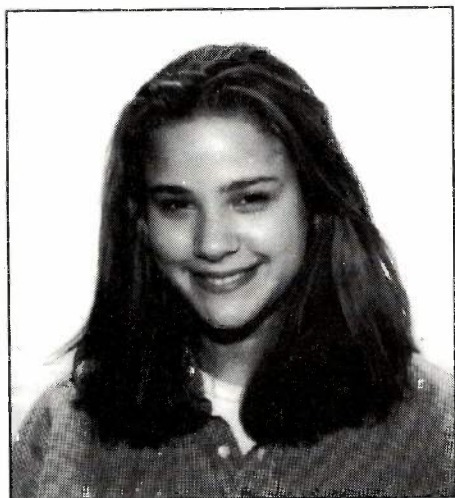


WHAT BEING JEWISH MEANS TO ME



Adina Schapiro
Columbia University
Class of 1998
Jewish Theological Seminary of America
Class of 1998

My link to the Jewish people was forged by a personal encounter with fear; not the fear of bombs that terrorize, but the fear of the power of a single aberrant cell in my body to alter the course of my life. I am a cancer survivor, and, like the Biblical Jacob, I have grappled with the angel until daybreak. In that struggle, I was brought closer to God, the land of Israel, and to my people.

At age twelve I was diagnosed with bone cancer. I endured numerous surgeries, chemotherapy, and physical therapy to learn to walk again. During the course of treatment, I asked to go to Israel since I had never been there and feared that I would never have the opportunity. Something deep within was calling me there. My ten days in Israel were magical: I received the blessing of a revered rabbi, and my family and I rejoiced at my Bat Mitzvah at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. In the years that followed my recovery I returned to Israel on several occasions, making up for time lost in hospital wards and rehab centers.

In many ways, I am a typical college student, interested in friends, fashion, studies, and career. But I know that my brush with death sets me apart from many of my contemporaries. I emerged from it with a renewed faith and a heightened sensitivity to the sanctity of life. In Judaism, nothing is more sacred than the life of a human being. Our tradition teaches us that saving one life is like saving the entire world.

Recently, I marked the fifth anniversary of being cancer-free. My family and I breathed a collective sigh of relief and thanksgiving. But I know, as does every cancer survivor, that there are no guarantees. Our lives are very fragile.

I also know that the same can be said for the Jewish people. Only our faith and the bond of our communal life have enabled us to survive centuries of hatred and persecution, even extermination.

We need not search the pages of history to learn that human beings are capable of great inhumanity. Recent events in Rwanda, Oklahoma City, or Tel Aviv, show us time and again how the lives of innocent adults and children are ended in an instant by bullets or bombs.

But we have also witnessed human acts of great love, empathy, and healing. These are a reminder of the seeds of compassion and love that God has planted in the human spirit. My own faith in God and my reliance on the power of community have given me the strength to face the future with the hope that such seeds will grow and flourish. To me, that is the meaning of being Jewish.

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The American Jewish Committee

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

The American Jewish Committee,
Dept. JCAD, 165 East 56 Street, New York, New York 10022