

A Wondering Jew

*One woman's search for
identity*

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1. A self-conscious Jew

Growing up in a small, residential city in the San Francisco Bay Area, I was the only Jewish kid in my class throughout elementary school. None of my friends from Girl Scouts and ballet had to skip school and miss geography tests on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to sit in services all day. In kindergarten, my mother visited my classroom on Hanukkah to read the *Festival of Lights*, light the candles on our menorah, recite the prayer and make sizzling, greasy latkes in our portable griddle. Nobody's mother came in or read about the birth of Baby Jesus or explained the meaning of the nativity scene.

During Passover, in first grade, I unwrapped my matzo sandwiches, causing curiosity about my funny-looking bread. In second, third and fourth grades, our music teacher introduced Christmas songs as soon as Thanksgiving ended; eventually, I summoned the courage to request "I Had a Little Dreidel." By fourth grade, I begged my parents for a Christmas tree so that I, too, could hang tinsel, lights and ornaments from its branches. My mother acquiesced, since she'd grown up with a Hanukkah bush. My father refused. He said Zeida and Boba, my Eastern European grandparents, would be disappointed. We couldn't cross that cultural line. My frustration and little girl rage—at their mixed messages and at being different—simmered.

Initially, we belonged to a Conservative synagogue, where my older brother and I attended Hebrew school, and, at age thirteen, he read from the Torah for his Bar Mitzvah. We switched allegiances later, moving further left on the Jewish spectrum of observance to Reform, which rejects the customary authority of Jewish law and tradition. In our new Temple, the rabbi emphasized social action, supporting Israel and *Tikun Olam*, or repairing the world, rather than belief in God.

At home, God's name never surfaced unless my mother dropped something and screamed "God damn it!" We ate pork chops, cheeseburgers and shrimp, and only turned up at Temple on major holidays or special occasions. My brother and I attended Hebrew school every Sunday morning and Tuesday afternoon. At my Friday night Bat Mitzvah, the cantor strummed his guitar while singing "Jennifer, this is your evening," a song he wrote, I presumed, for me. We socialized with our *Havurah*, a group of like-minded families with kids of similar ages. My school life and my Jewish life never overlapped, and because I felt so different in the former, I clung to the latter.

For five summers, I attended Camp Swig, a Reform-affiliated enclave in Santa Clara County, first as a camper then as a counselor-in-training and finally as a counselor. In high school, I served as a chaplain on the local board of the National Federation of Temple Youth movement: writing and officiating services for our youth group conclaves where we—hundreds of Jewish teenagers from Sacramento to Fresno—sang songs and chanted prayers, our arms around each other, swaying together. My closest friends and boyfriends anchored my identity as a Reform Jew in a predominantly Catholic place. In my final year of high school, I began dating my youth group advisor; he intended to become a rabbi.

2. An open-minded Jew

After I settled into my dormitory at Northwestern University, I gravitated toward others like me from Ohio, Michigan and Wisconsin. Some nights, we sat around our dorm rooms singing songs like "*Shir Mi-libeinu*" and "*Gesher Tzar M'od*" with guitar accompaniment, reminiscing about our summers at Reform camps around the country. God's name never crossed our lips. Our Judaism revolved around behavior, not belief in any deity.

I didn't restrict myself to Reform Jews. One of my classmates, Staci, grew up Modern Orthodox in nearby Skokie. She'd always at-

tended Jewish schools, learning modern and biblical Hebrew, laws and customs. Because she kept kosher, Staci ate meals at the campus Hillel. Sometimes, she invited me to spend the weekend with her family, teaching me the rules of *Shabbat*—no turning on and off electricity, writing, drawing, driving or cooking. One rainy Saturday morning, I grabbed my umbrella until she stopped me, saying, “Silly, you can’t carry that. It’s *Shabbos*.” Who knew carrying is considered work? She never judged me, my exposure to drinking, my experimenting with smoking or my experience with boys. She had no desire or intention to live outside the boundaries of Jewish law, and I had no desire to live within them. Whenever I accompanied her to *shul*, where men and women sat separately and women couldn’t participate in the Torah service—holding or reading the ancient text—I felt inferior, invisible. Staci widened my eyes to see Reform Judaism through a new lens, and to see a different way of living Jewishly. She made me question my ancestral roots and the rituals they had—and hadn’t—transmitted. She made me think what kind of a Jew I did—and didn’t—want to be.

3. An anonymous Jew

During my junior year abroad in France, I pined for my camp and youth group friends studying in Israel, filling aerogrammes about visiting the Western Wall on *Shabbat* and celebrating holidays with Jews from South Africa and South America. Of the 120 students on my program, only one woman identified as Jewish, willing to attend High Holiday services with me.

In Tours, the heart of the Loire Valley, where we spent our first month of acclimation, we entered the staid building and climbed the stairs to the women’s section. A dozen females congregated, whispering. We opened the tattered prayer books and struggled through the foreign words to usher in the new year. Nobody welcomed us; nobody wished us a *Shana Tova*; nobody invited us to eat; nobody

asked us our names. I wasn't there because of some deep-seated need to connect with God, but rather out of a desire to hold onto tradition, passed down from my grandparents to my parents to me.

The separate seating, old-style prayer service and Old-World tunes reminded me of Staci's synagogue in Skokie. In both, I felt out of place and isolated—a Reform Jew among observant Jews. I had to choose: either try to replicate my Jewish friends' spiritual experiences in France, or cast my Judaism aside in order to make the most of my year abroad.

By the time I settled into my host family's apartment in Paris, I'd opted for the latter. My religion had never defined, restricted or controlled me.

Every day I absorbed new words and understood more of my French family's banter. At dinner, I learned that the Gardettes never missed Sunday Mass, and Monsieur and Madame aligned themselves with the extreme-right-wing party, Le Front National. I also learned that Monsieur regarded blacks, homosexuals and Arabs as other, different and lesser than the French. Most likely, he regarded Jews the same way. They never questioned my religious background, but I didn't divulge much either.

I didn't step foot into one Parisian synagogue. At Hanukkah, I didn't light candles. For winter break, I flew to Israel to meet my parents and brother, who had emigrated there after college, without telling the Gardettes my whereabouts. My living arrangement was a business transaction, and they didn't need to know. For Passover/spring break, I traveled south to Spain, avoiding matzo altogether.

All year, my long-distance boyfriend wrote airmail letters about his student pulpit in rural northern California. I sensed his world had shrunk and become intensely Jewish, while mine had expanded, anonymity replacing religion. In summer, while we traveled by train through Western Europe, I froze whenever conversations about our future arose. He envisioned me moving in with him after my graduation, him becoming ordained, finding a congregation, and us getting married. Did I want to live in Anywhere, America, and be a rabbi's wife?

Something new and foreign had nestled inside me: a desire to broaden my sheltered Jewish-American existence, to learn more languages, to live differently. My European adventures had shown me that once we shed our labels and identities as Jews or Catholics, French or American, Reform or Orthodox, left- or right-wing, we share the same core humanity. We each long to experience love, feel safe, find contentment and be accepted as ourselves.

Marrying him and living that Jewish life would be like sliding back to the beginning of the Chutes and Ladders board: the wrong direction.

4. A detached Jew

I returned to Northwestern feeling untethered. My major—Human Development and Social Policy—meant nothing. My semester-long internship at Quaker Oats in Chicago seemed pointless. My English sometimes escaped me. My peers yearned for a post-graduation job in corporate America, while I yearned for something unnamable.

I broke up with my boyfriend, saying, “I need to explore more, to figure out who I am, where I want to be.”

When a former classmate called from Paris, I saw it as a sign. We’d crossed paths the previous summer while she was on vacation from her job at the World Jewish Congress. After two years abroad, she was returning home. Did her Bilingual Assistant position interest me? Would I be willing to return to France in September—a risk since her boss wouldn’t hire me until we’d met? A believer in synchronicity, I’d never felt so sure that someone, somewhere was giving me the green light.

5. A professional Jew

After an informal interview at the Jewish non-governmental non-profit, I started working. There, I befriended my French-born Jewish colleagues of North African origins: Nathalie of Tunisia, Shosha-

na of Morocco, and Corinne of Algeria. They invited me to synagogue for Rosh Hashanah, to Hanukkah parties with their friends, and to Passover Seders with their families. They made me forget how often my boss criticized me, challenging my fluency if I said or wrote something in incorrect French.

I listened to unfathomable tales about the French Resistance and concentration camps from Henri Bulawko, a Holocaust survivor and office volunteer. I studied the negatives of our in-house photographer Frédéric Brenner whose passion documenting Jewish communities had led him from India to Yemen, from Russia to Ethiopia.

I said yes to every opportunity: visiting the American cemetery and beaches, learning about my country's history that I'd long forgotten; eating oysters and snails, mussels and frogs; and bathing at the Grand Mosque of a Paris-run *hammam*. I dated a Catholic named Christophe whose obsession with Manhattan matched my fixation on France. When I told my brother I'd invited Christophe to meet the family in the Big Apple, he balked. My brother, who was studying Jewish text in Jerusalem, thanking God after every meal and rebuffing physical contact with women, shouted, "I will not acknowledge him and refuse to be with you as long as *he* is in the same room!" I retaliated, telling him I didn't care if I dated or even married a Jew.

I didn't care whether my sibling or my superior approved of my escapades or not. For eighteen months, I played the part of a Jewish professional, but my free time—my life—belonged to me.

6. A Jew in limbo

My visa stipulated that I could only stay in Paris if I worked for the Congress, but, since my boss made me miserable, I quit. I'd decided to return to the U.S. for graduate school but had a six-month gap to fill.

When two camp friends invited me to visit them in Israel, I accepted. My objectives—to learn Hebrew and to heal the relationship with my brother—justified flying east.

“Whatever you do, don’t fall in love and stay!” my mother warned. She didn’t want to lose both her children to that country.

“I have no intention of staying,” I said. “Don’t worry.”

Five weeks after I arrived in the Promised Land, I met Philippe. Jewish and French, he’d recently emigrated to look for a chemical engineer position. Jewish and French, he was worldly, well-traveled and multilingual. Jewish and French, he combined both a religion and a culture I loved. Jewish and French, he lured me with his grammatically flawed English and silky soft J when he slid my given name, Jennifer, off his tongue.

A month after commuting between his place in Haifa and mine in Jerusalem, Philippe invited me to move in with him. I stalled. A month later, I agreed, packing up my measly belongings to go north. I enrolled in a municipal Hebrew class. He job hunted. I deferred graduate school. The Israel Electric Corporation hired him. I reasoned that a master’s in political science at the University of Haifa couldn’t be so different from one in public policy at NYU. I wasn’t ready to leave the country or this Frenchman but knew that staying meant prolonging the expat life for an indefinite period. Could I envision living in Israel rather than visiting? When my mother called to tell me she needed braces, she asked for a wedding date—she didn’t want them on for pictures. On that frigid December day, Philippe teasingly picked a date nine months away: 9-9-90.

Being with Philippe felt right, but being Jewish in Israel irked me. I’d visited the country many times but never knew that Israeli society divides into two: observant or secular, all or nothing. I’d grown up choosing how much religion to incorporate into my life rather than living my life according to my religion.

Before we met, Philippe, a traditional French Jew, had upped his level of religiosity, deciding to no longer cook, drive, write, ride a bike, watch television or listen to music from Friday to Saturday sundown. He said he accepted me for who I was, but could I accept him? Could I spend the rest of my life with someone who, like my

brother, put religion before relationship?

Since my faith wasn't based on beliefs, I challenged Philippe: did we have to spend an entire *Shabbat* with my cousins if I was willing to drive home after Friday night dinner? Couldn't we eat in a non-kosher restaurant in Haifa, a mixed Arab-Jewish city with a large secular population, since so few were kosher? Would God strike us down if we drove to the beach Saturday afternoon?

"I'm not your brother," Philippe reminded me. Unlike my brother, Philippe swam and showered on *Shabbat* (drying off with a towel is prohibited) and believed in premarital sex any day of the week (touching members of the opposite sex is forbidden for Ultra-Orthodox Jews).

If I hadn't been in a transitional state between Europe and America, job and school, I might never have come to Israel and met and married Philippe. But if I hadn't been in a state of uncertainty with regard to my faith, perhaps I would have felt less anxiety as a Jewish-American woman in the Holy Land.

7. A distant Jew

When Philippe wanted to pursue a MBA in France, I jumped at the chance to leave Israel. Five years there were four too many. We arrived in Paris with our one-year-old son days before the High Holidays in September. After discovering a nearby synagogue, Philippe set off, alone. Even though Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur were the two holiest days of the year, I numbed at the thought of sitting in the balcony like a second-class citizen and listening to unrecognizable prayers and foreign tunes.

Most married French-Jewish women don a hat before entering *shul*, keeping in line with the rules of modesty to cover their hair in public. Many men, like Philippe, wrap *tefillin*, two small black boxes with black straps, around their arm and forehead each weekday morning before prayer and on *Shabbat* and holidays. Most French Jews observe the laws of *kashrut*, dividing milk from meat, each with

its own set of dishes; many attend services on Friday night and dine at home *en famille*. None of it appealed to me.

During our ten months in Paris, I distanced myself from Judaism. Running a home, raising a baby and working left me little energy to nurture myself. I let my relationship to religion fade and neither felt nor filled the void.

8. A reluctant Jew

After Paris, we flew west to spend a second year in the San Francisco Bay Area before returning to Israel, as planned. I hadn't anticipated an easy transition after twelve years away, especially with a foreign husband and a toddler in tow, but the close proximity to my parents helped. I quickly secured a job as Marketing Coordinator for the San Francisco Jewish Federation, but it took Philippe a year to break into website development.

Supporting ourselves was as important as connecting to a Jewish community. Philippe floundered and began clinging even more tightly to the religion's rules and boundaries. His traditional upbringing translated into Modern Orthodoxy, and, without discussion, we joined Beth Jacob Congregation, a one-mile walk from our rental house.

I often accompanied him, sitting on the opposite side of the *mehitza*, the barrier running through the main sanctuary. Because attending synagogue was a way to forge new friendships. Because it meant a lot to Philippe, who'd never dreamed of living in my native land. Because my father, for myriad reasons, also attended Beth Jacob and beamed at his grandson.

Yet each time I stepped foot inside the building, I felt displaced. Like my once vibrant Reform Jewish identity had been kicked aside. I stumbled over prayers in English with references to God, unable to utter the word. At a loss, I buried my former self.

Our new community, an eclectic group of young families comprised of Modern Orthodox transplants from the east coast, perhaps

drawn to the climate and the less stringent, watered-down version of Orthodoxy, welcomed us. They represented different shades of observance: the rabbi's wife always covered her hair, while most married women only did so on *Shabbat* in the sanctuary; many families kept kosher homes but ate at non-kosher vegetarian restaurants in the Bay Area. No one ever judged me or cared if I went to services, prayed, or believed in God.

Our year in Oakland extended to six, during which we brought two daughters into the world. Philippe had no desire to stay state-side, but I refused to return to Israel, where the Palestinian bus bombs of the 1990s led to the Second Intifada of the new millennium. When Philippe said he felt betrayed, I absorbed his wrath, too immersed in child rearing and the day-to-day business of getting by.

Consciously or subconsciously, I reasoned that if I chose country then he could rule over religion.

9. An uncomfortable Jew

In 2001, when the kids were two, four, and seven, we changed coasts. Philippe's employer, an American-Israeli high-tech company, advised him to relocate—either to New York or Israel—in order to keep his job. I rejected Israel for reasons of safety and distance, pointing out that the eastern seaboard seemed logical, midway between our families.

Unlike some people who choose a home based on public schools or property taxes, we considered walking distance to a Modern Orthodox synagogue, affordable tuition at Jewish private schools, and an open-minded community for our mixed marriage. As soon as we heard about the Hebrew Institute of White Plains, which describes itself as “a diverse community ... those with extensive Jewish backgrounds and those with less,” we joined.

Despite the diversity in our chosen community, I found Orthodoxy in the tristate area—New York, New Jersey, Connecticut—cookie-cutter and rigid compared to California. Most of our peers

knew each other from Jewish day schools, *shuls*, or summer camp; they kept kosher in and outside their homes. It was like an Old-Boys Club, an inbred Jewish clique that shared the same alma maters and camp cheers. My Reform upbringing had no place. I never played Jewish geography, asking who knew who, like I had in California.

Surprisingly, I began to appreciate the slowing down on *Shabbat*. Friday nights, we ate dinner in pajamas, played endless rounds of Uno and read books. Saturday mornings, Philippe left the house with the kids, who met friends and made playdates at *shul*. I attended on rare occasions, mostly holidays or Bar/Bat Mitzvahs. Sometimes we entertained people or were invited out for meals.

But if anyone dared tell me what I could or couldn't do, I cringed. "Mommy, why are you wearing leather shoes?" my middle child questioned me one Yom Kippur. (Apparently, we're supposed to afflict ourselves, according to the Torah, and leather shoes are typically comfortable, therefore something to avoid.) "Are you gonna fast?" the oldest asked. Growing up, I'd never succeeded, almost fainting one September in synagogue, but since when did I have to answer to my children? I huffed loudly, shooing them out of my room while getting dressed or even snapping at them, "It's none of your business," knowing how cruel and immature I sounded. What I really wanted to say I couldn't: I grew up Reform and you're being raised Orthodox, and *Abba* beseeched me to align with him on religious matters, at least on the outside. But they were too young to understand. As long as we lived in the States, I continued to cede on Judaism and tried my best to keep the peace.

10. An angry Jew

As time passed, Philippe and I each grew restless. Our solution: a semi-sabbatical year in a peaceful city in the center of Israel near his company's headquarters. When we told our kids, they raged. I'd never moved during my childhood but could imagine how daunting it felt. My desire to shake up our routine, to stave off a prevailing

Keep-up-with-the-Joneses mentality and the accompanying midlife complacency surrounding us, and to expose our kids to a different way of living beside their insular New York Jewish one, outweighed my fear. Thanks to the Israeli West Bank barrier and a general clampdown on security, Israel seemed peaceful.

After settling into our fully-furnished rental home in Raanana, the kids started third, fifth and ninth grades. I steeled myself for a bumpy ride as they transitioned to reading from right to left, six shorter school days a week, and hearing Hebrew nonstop.

They fared better than I. I hadn't lived in Israel for thirteen years and had never been to Raanana. I'd never raised children in the country and didn't fully grasp the school-*Shabbat* situation. Our only full day off was Saturday, but we couldn't drive anywhere. I felt suffocated—by kids home for lunch and long, hot afternoons; by the Jewish calendar whereby every holiday, whether major or minor, was observed; by a city that shut down completely every Friday afternoon until Sunday morning.

Two months into our adventure, I yelled at my spouse, "*Shabbat* feels like a noose around my neck!" I missed our lazy New York Sundays, which began with homemade waffles and often included family hikes, bike rides or errands, thereby balancing out Saturday's restrictions.

In White Plains, I'd occasionally attended services, but in Raanana, the synagogue Philippe gravitated toward was the upstairs room of a run-down, city-owned building, with plastic chairs and dirty tiled flooring. The women's section was divided by a low partition from the men's, but the rabbi's sermon—in Hebrew—and Torah readings occurred on the men's side. Women could either stare out the tiny window straight ahead or strain their necks. But I went because I liked some of the English-speaking women, immigrants from America, Canada, South Africa, Australia, England and elsewhere.

If anyone asked how I felt about being back in Israel, I ranted about everything I missed: longer school hours, my sense of purpose

outside the home, our two-day weekend and the Gregorian calendar. My attitude and behavior felt beyond my control, as if I were possessed.

From January until we left for New York in July, Philippe begged me to extend our time. I dug in my heels, insisting we return to Westchester, as planned. Would I consider returning to Israel after? In his fantasy world, we'd go back to White Plains to sell our house, leave our jobs and move the kids yet again—to Israel, for good.

Reality slapped me: Israel was home for Philippe, not for me.

11. A torn Jew

Back in New York, Philippe and I started therapy. Anger and resentment had been building for years, me toward Philippe and me at myself, for not standing up for or holding onto my version of Judaism. And then, one night, it all dissolved.

"I'm sorry I ever asked Jennifer to keep *Shabbat* and do things that made her so uncomfortable," said my husband of two decades. He slouched in a worn leather recliner, I sat upright on the ultra-suede sofa, and our therapist in her swivel desk chair. We faced each other in a triangle. I dabbed at my eyes. A long held breath escaped.

I summoned the courage to express my needs and desires for the first time since our wedding. Every Saturday morning, Philippe and the kids continued to leave home and turn right toward Hebrew Institute, where they prayed and socialized, while I sometimes turned left toward the Reconstructionist synagogue Bet Am Shalom. There, I had close friends, women whom I'd met in other parts of my life. Women who sat next to their spouses, as a family. Women who introduced me to their fellow congregants. Women who, like men, read from the Torah and recited blessings on the podium.

As much as I wished my husband or kids would accompany me, I knew they'd feel out of place. Rather than dwell, I focused instead on what I loved—the beech wood seats and sunlight streaming in through the windows like the Temple of my childhood, the familiar

prayer service I used to lead during my years as chaplain, the tunes I knew by heart. There in that place of worship, I sensed a bigger, all-encompassing force. It wasn't tapping me on the shoulder or whispering in my ear, but it moved me. I sang. I shivered. I teared up. I still didn't utter God's name aloud, but was I wrong about not believing? Or was it just the memories of who I once was as a Jew flooding my mind and body?

After services, Philippe and I either congregated at home or with friends in the neighborhood. We came by foot from opposite sides of town, and although it always felt like four against one, I arrived feeling bolstered.

Two years later, Philippe announced he couldn't envision spending one more cycle of holidays in the United States. If I wouldn't accompany him to Israel, he'd go with our firstborn, who'd decided to enlist in the Israeli Defense Forces after high school. Our emotionally charged conversations, mostly with the therapist, continued until we agreed to return to Israel together, as a family, at the end of the following school year.

"But if we move to Israel, then I no longer intend to play along with or abide by your version of Judaism or hide mine," I said. "I'll respect your desire to observe *Shabbat*, but I don't have to do it that way."

Philippe nodded.

Our conversations continued.

"The kids have a right to know that *Abba* believes X and Mommy Y." I'd always maintained that honest parenting trumped deceitful; Philippe had begged me to present a more united religious front. "They've been educated in Orthodox schools and will have each had a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. And we'd always said they'd have the right to choose how they want to observe."

Our therapist listened. So did my spouse. Initially reluctant, he agreed.

We swapped: he'd get country, and I, religion.

12. A spiritual, secular Jew

Since our return to Raanana, Philippe and I live more authentically. He's content and relaxed, happy to be in *his* Holy Land, while I feel more true to myself, relieved to no longer feign a way of life that felt false every week. Our downstairs living space is Sabbath-observant, but in our rooms, we do as we please. If I want to read before bed on Friday night, I turn on my lamp; if I want to use my electric toothbrush or my phone, I do.

Every *Shabbat* morning, Philippe goes to synagogue alone. While my teenagers sleep, I attend a yoga class, drive to the beach, or visit friends for coffee. I take the car and couldn't care less who sees me. Where we live, our Israeli neighbors don't care anyhow.

Whenever we meet new people, they eye Philippe's yarmulke and automatically assume we keep the laws of *Shabbat* and *kashrut*. If the conversation arises, which it often does, I say: "We're in a mixed marriage," or, "he's religious, but I'm not." The all-or-nothing, religious-or-secular paradigm doesn't fit my sense of self or my belief system.

Even if those people might label me secular, because I don't have faith in and abide by Judaism's monolithic definition of God, I'm spiritual. I swear by signs, synchronicity and some superstitions. I consider certain places and things and relationships sacred, to be regarded with reverence: synagogues, cathedrals and churches, temples and mosques, libraries, Mother Earth, artists of every kind, and, most of all, marriage.

When I married a Jewish Frenchman, my mother had said, "It's *bashert*," which is Yiddish for destiny. Have I spent the past twenty-five years fighting some grand, predetermined plan—to live here, with Philippe, in this land? I think not. I made the decision to stay in Israel, to marry this man.

But does our religious experience differ depending on where we live and the people who surround us? I think—no, I believe—so. I believe.