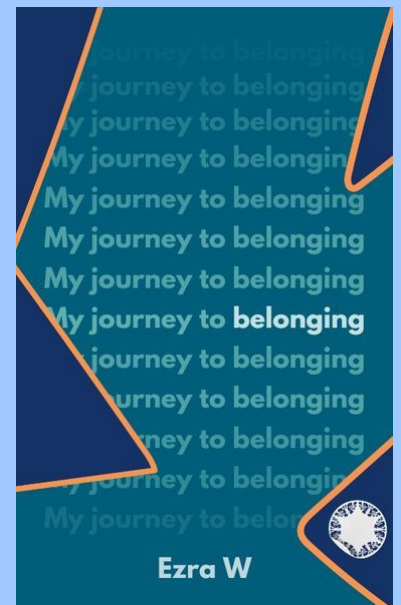




KALEIDOSCOPE

My journey to belonging



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Occasionally, I would return to shul and the Rabbi would encourage me to get involved. This never quite gave me the lasting motivation I needed, though. My younger brother's bar mitzvah came around, and went. And he too then stopped any Jewish observance. Something changed when I went on Birthright after finishing school.



I had absolutely no idea what was going on.

There I was, weaving in and out of smartly dressed gentlemen - each draped with a white tallit.

I was on the bimah now, although I wasn't to know - of course.

As I continued to rush around, I realised that the sweets given to me earlier had somehow left my pocket and had, instead, stuck themselves to the seats and walls of the bimah.

It was a terrible mess.

Quite spectacularly, I had managed to stick myself to what felt like every seat and wall.

Amidst the congregation's focus on Torah reading, I managed to quickly untangle myself (relatively) undetected.

These were my earliest memories of Jewish life, in my local synagogue on the south coast of England.

In these early years of life, I went to shul frequently with my grandma. I used to particularly enjoy helping out with the kiddush. I would help to carry the plastic trays from the kitchen to the main area of the synagogue.

The trays were adorned with a variety of Jewish delights, including herring, chopped egg and smoked salmon.

The very sight of the delicious pita with egg and onion used to make my stomach rumble. Some things don't change with time!

The women who worked in the synagogue's kitchen rewarded my efforts with a seemingly limitless supply of olives and pickles. I had little complaints: this seemed a very good bargain to me.

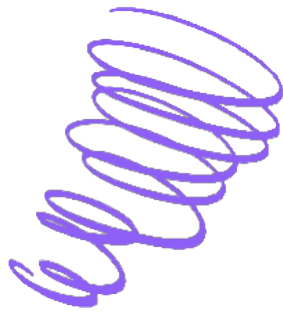
But, alas, some things do change with time.

As I grew older, the prospect of going to synagogue appealed less to me.

Younger children appeared and stole the limelight, meanwhile the prospect of playing football at the weekend lured me away too. More than anything, I suddenly had a choice over how I spent my time.

My family not being particularly religious (my mum very rarely attends synagogue, and my dad is not Jewish), there was no obligation for me to continue going to shul. My grandma too - although keen for me to engage in Jewish life - recognised that I had a choice in the matter.

I drifted further away from Jewish life.



With very few Jewish friends in my local area, I began to lose all connection to Judaism.

The final string keeping me connected to Judaism was the tradition of lighting the candles every Friday night with my grandma.

As I sit here writing this, I see my grandma across from me. She is the most wonderful woman.

Every Friday, she welcomes me with a hug. When I walk in, a platter of my favourite food awaits me: egg and onion, smoked salmon, couscous salad and more.

Throughout the years, we have sat over that table and discussed everything. You name it, we've discussed it. It has brought us incredibly close together, and it has kept us in touch with our religion, too.

Visiting Israel for the first time when I was around 9 years old was a big moment in my life.

I remember feeling a connection to the country - I was especially influenced by the Kotel. Despite understanding little about its significance, there was something quite special about the whole experience.

And then my bar mitzvah came around.

Before the big day, I had lessons with the Rabbi and memorised my portion. With many family friends present, I delivered my portion just as we had practised.

I was showered in sweets and smiles, just like when I was younger - it was a special moment.

I remember distinctly being given a big hug by my younger brother, who had since come into the world.

Now I was a man.

After the completion of my speech to the congregation, I was given a Siddur by the Rabbi.

I remember the Rabbi telling me that he didn't want me to keep the Siddur pristine - much better was for it to show the signs of being used.

But alas, the Siddur sat in my room collecting dust. Over time, it was neglected, and the same went for my tallit and tefillin.

Instead, I prioritised my school books.

Occasionally, I would return to shul and the Rabbi would encourage me to get involved. This never quite gave me the lasting motivation I needed, though.

My younger brother's bar mitzvah came around, and went. And he too then stopped any Jewish observance.



Something changed when I went on Birthright after finishing school.

Travelling through the beautiful Israeli mountains and deserts; past the flowing rivers and the bustling cities, I felt a connection to Judaism and the country so strongly.

More than anything, I will forever cherish the memories of my time with the group and the wonderful Israeli men and women that we met on the way.

The music and the smiles; the scars of conflict, and the immense energy of life.

The experience was so powerful that, after arriving back at a depressing London Heathrow, I couldn't help myself sobbing in the car all the way home.

I was back from the dreamy clouds to reality.

I received a place at the University of Exeter, to study law.

In Freshers' Week, I threw myself into a variety of different activities. I must've attended about 50 different events.

One of the few societies that made a lasting impression was the Jewish society.

Perhaps it was the isolation in the depths of Devon, the experience of Birthright or the friendliness of its members, but I decided to become a regular attendee.

In my first year, I went to almost all of the Jsoc's events. We were only a small bunch (just 10/20 of us), but that made things quite relaxed. I came to know pretty much everyone, and we all developed a good bond.

As my first year wound down, it was announced that the society would need a new president. With no-one else keen to stand for the role, I put myself forward.

Quite unexpectedly, I suddenly found myself as president of the Jewish society.

But little did I anticipate the year that was in store for me.

Envisaging a year filled with joyous Friday night dinners, I was met with something quite different. After a smooth Freshers' Week and the first couple of events out of the way, October 7th changed everything.

All of a sudden, I was thrust into meetings with the chaplaincy team, the university, the police and more - all whilst trying to keep the society running.

Needless to say, it was an extremely stressful time.

Amongst all the stress and upset, I noticed that my connection to Judaism was growing stronger.

Throughout the seemingly endless string of meetings, my committee and I got closer. I started wrapping tefillin again. I visited Israel again (this time with UJS), and saw - first hand - the devastation caused by the heinous attack of October 7th. I began to attend the Exeter Synagogue more often.

The congregation in Exeter are fiercely proud of being part of the 3rd oldest synagogue in the UK. It's so sweet.

They are very welcoming too, and are always keen for me to have a role - whether it be opening the ark, being called up to the bimah or carrying the Torah.

I still can't read Hebrew, and I often don't know what's going on during a service - but I don't mind.

Going to synagogue and participating in Jewish life is now a choice, not an obligation. Especially throughout the past year, I have become incredibly proud to be Jewish.

Judaism is a religion constantly under attack, and I feel more strongly than ever the desire to play a role in protecting it.