



KALEIDOSCOPE

If I am not for myself, who is?



Name: **Liza C**

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I was born in Antakya and later moved to Istanbul where there is Jewish school, a larger community with members who were not my relatives, and Jewish youth clubs, summer camps, Israel trips and links with global Jewry. On reflection, the learning focused on religion and Hebrew but we also had strong bonds with global Jewry. Nevertheless, Antakya has a special place in my heart.



"יִתְמִיָא, וְיִשְׁכַּח אֶל מָוֹ? יִבְנָא דָּמ, יִמְצָעֵל יִבְאָשְׁכוּ? לִי יֵמ, יֵל יִבְנָא נִיא מָא?"

"If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"

(Pirkei Avot 1:14)

I am asked to tell about who am I. To write my human biography. As with most of my writings, I should start by asking questions, to myself; to nature; to the void and ceiling; to every soul who finds it worthy enough to read it. And yes, you already know I like asking questions. Curiosity is a must for me. Probably readers who already had the privilege of knowing me are giggling. Before you guess something else, I occasionally use sarcasm and I like to joke about many things, one being daily and humane situations.

You might be wondering whether the question at stake here is the first quote by Hillel or is it something else?

It is all. To be able to tell you all who I am really, I need to ask myself questions. I got inspired by Rabbi Hillel's quote, it offers a thought-provoking idea to explore and to try to understand who we really are. It encourages me to think about concepts such as responsibility, identity, community, boundaries, personal and communal space, commitment, Tikun Olam (Repairing the World), self-care, priorities, Jewish values...

You might be wondering about my observance level since I have been inspired by a quote by Rabbi Hillel. I don't consider myself religiously observant, but I am highly interested in Jewish wisdom, history and culture, values and thoughts.

I have been privileged enough to experience different facets of Judaism, Jewish life and culture across the globe. Another thing to catch about me is that I am fond of exploring, travelling, adventures, and challenges. This includes living in different places, encountering different cultures, and exploring different "me"s. As someone who travels as much as she can, I also had the opportunity to get to know many different Jewish communities. I am aware that being Jewish is not merely about 613 mitzvot or Shabbat or kashrut or heritage or religion or food or family or tradition or education or Israel or diaspora or Hebrew language or literature or music or art or anything that comes to your mind about being Jewish... Rather, it is a growing totality of experience and compilation of interconnected living mechanisms. Thus I won't consider getting inspired by Rabbi Hillel as solely religious. It is much more than that. And I am committed to breaking some taboos along this.

A modern biography, I guess, should also include some personal and professional information. This information certainly influenced my life, yet it has a lesser meaning as separate decisions.



Before you start wondering, I was born in Antakya, the southernmost city of current day Türkiye, on a very early December morning. I lived in my hometown until 2nd grade and then moved to Istanbul with my family. I directly realized the Jewish context I experienced in Antakya was quite different from the one in Istanbul. First and foremost, there was a growing community with a Jewish school, with many community members who are not in any way my relatives, and more Jewish opportunities including youth clubs, exchange with different schools, Jewish summer camps, Israel trips, kosher butchers and restaurants, synagogues, etc. This multiplicity of options may seem attractive, although now looking back the Jewish learning was unilateral and focused mostly on religion and Hebrew. Even so, it had growing bonds with global Jewry. Nevertheless, the area I was born in has a special place in my heart.

At the age of 17, I moved to Italy alone, to pursue my bachelor's in International Relations and Global Affairs. It was a time when I intentionally or unintentionally took a break from Jewish gatherings and estranged the "Jewish bubble". Perhaps it was a necessary step for me to again find myself more connected than ever. I can definitely give credit to JDC1's Europe project Junction2 Annual which at the time was happening in Milan (happens to be my city at the time!). It was a funny and retrospectively very meant-to-be encounter it seems! It was a moment where I was rediscovering some Jewish connections in Milan and around, meeting new people from the community. While I was searching for some keywords on Facebook, I came across the Junction Annual which was about to happen in Milan! I was amazed by the diversity and depth of Jewish existence in Europe, and I got more motivated to be involved. I saw that there was not only one way to be active in the community. We are not only participants in events or prayers or holiday events but also doers and multipliers of a greater network.

Being part of such a connected and big community also comes with so many opportunities as well as challenges. Most people within and outside of the community know very well that we are not that big relative to the world's general population. However, if the world is small, we are big. You can find anywhere a fellow Jew and get connected on the basis of common struggles and experiences. Here it is necessary to add a side note, this does not mean in any way that we should be (or at least the way I see it) disconnected from the "great window". This great window allows us to see the bigger pictures of our small world. Creating bonds and bridges with different identities does not mean we create a narrative of "we" and "them", "us" and "others" but to keep in mind that each community may have a unique story of where they are coming from and they intersect in many topics. Similarly, many fellow community members differ and disagree on many topics both Jewish-related and also general. However, the common history and culture reconnect us.

Growing up, one of the values I have learned was also the warm approach I take when meeting new people. My ability to connect with people easily and directly, without any borders. My close circle, occasionally, tends to find this worrying as the world is getting worrying in many aspects. Or they tend to find me too brave or too naive. We can't just start assuming bad intentions of people, thus, I believe in random encounters even though I am not a romantic.

Going back to the initial idea, being aware that I bring a valuable and different background does not mean I carry the "right" and "better" perspective, nor that I am the sole representative of a community I am part of. It is also clear that we are not part of only one community, but today the one I am focusing on is the Jewish one.

I learned about Hillel's quote while I was in Berlin. Yes, I was and am on the move! After Milan, I discovered a Jewish gap year program, aka JAcademy. Funny enough, I discovered this during Junction Annual!

This program was also a life-changer in its role for my active participation in European Jewry. I have realized how well Jewish life and professional life can go together and one does not compromise or give up one to be involved in both. People can keep Shabbat and can be successful professionals, that is another taboo we should break.

I first heard about Hillel's quote in JAcademy. It was impressive in its depth. Already 2000 years ago, he knew that self-care and self-love were important but not only... We are living with other humans with needs and feelings, and we also have responsibility for our community and for the whole world.

Breaking another taboo, Jewish learning can be and is fun and interesting!

Until the pandemic hit the world and JAcademy, I had the opportunity to explore Jewish contexts in Germany, the UK, USA, Poland by visiting and living, as well as Spain, Greece, Bulgaria, and Ukraine through conversations with fellow participants in the program.

Despite every challenge, the pandemic gave me the chance to break physical distances and reconnect with my family and with Istanbul. During that time, I dived deeper into Jewish studies online, on a more academic basis with Paideia. And now here I am, continuing my master's studies in Jewish Civilizations in beautiful Heidelberg. Though I stayed connected with the greater alumni network.

My connection to Türkiye and its Jewish community and its society at large has never ceased. My ongoing academic research interests were also already reflected in my bachelor thesis, where I explored the dynamics between Jewish minority group in Türkiye and the implications of the political and social changes. In addition to that, I have always been interested in sharing stories which I was again privileged enough to practice officially at Jewish News UK. Later on I started an initiative at Şalom Newspaper, representative of the Turkish Jewish press. The initiative was about engaging Jewish youth from Türkiye (despite their current residence) in the newspaper's content. We opened our own section with topics and stories youth may find compelling. The newspaper generally included a higher percentage of middle-aged and elderly writers and addressed less the youth. Reading has no borders and ages, but writing as a young person to a young person might bring a specific language and understanding.

Even though I was publishing my writings in various newspapers, platforms, and cultural journals most based in Türkiye, the collection of some of them has been translated into English and compiled into a book in April 2023. Sadly, while we were working on this project with my publisher, a very destructive earthquake happened on February 6th, 2023 and affected Türkiye and Syria, including my hometown Antakya to a great extent. Just at the moment that I am getting more and more interested in my roots, I realized there was no community left. That is when we hold on to memories, stories, songs, languages, food, family, and tradition. It is more important than ever for me to learn more about my roots. We ended up creating a social project from the publication, donating profits above production costs to the earthquake area. I dedicated it to my beloved paternal grandma, to my maternal grandma, and to the head of the community in Antakya who lost their lives in the earthquake.

My relationship with my paternal grandma and my maternal grandpa was so special for me.

I shared a room with her for a while growing up, she used to tell me a lot about our family stories and to teach Judeo-Arabic and French. She used to tell me: “Bir lisan, bir insan” (Translated into: “One language, one person”), knowing the value of languages and interconnectedness. She was my confidant, friend, roommate...

I shared jokes with him, and the whole family did. He made everyone laugh and smile, including himself. He was so kind and gentle with life, loved people; nature; world, creation and humanity. He taught me backgammon and it was my greatest joy to play with him every summer in our hometown.

I am committed to continue their legacy and make them proud. This is where I see myself in whatever I am doing in the future. Because interests and fields may change but, the Jewish life I want to have will have strong roots in my roots, as well as looking forward to new developments and challenges, not ignoring them but going after them. Challenging the challenges.

It is always challenging to predict where we will see ourselves in the future. Even job interviews undermine the difficulty in answering such questions when life can be so unpredictable and random, however, I see myself in one way or another involved in the Jewish community while the level of it might change.

Undeniably, there are also aspects I dislike about Jewish community life as well as being a young adult in a Jewish context. Everyone, without exception, tries to put others into boxes (perhaps me too by writing this). But speaking in very general terms, humans also need to think with expectations and assumptions, sometimes by our nature, sometimes because we are used to them, and maybe sometimes to protect us and our loved ones. But we might assume secular is all about rebellion and recklessness or assume observant ones are all about backwardness and dogma or young people are all about inexperience and living in the moment or diaspora is all about self-deceiving or Israel is all about conflict and getaways. The examples can go on forever, but my wish for the Jewish world is to break those expectations and assumptions and let various social groups show what they can offer.

The following sentence is an addition to my autobiography in the wake of the horror that perhaps began long ago but has continued raging since October 7, 2023 (22 Tishrei 5784). As much as I don't want to include hate and destruction in my autobiography, it is a constant reminder that we as people endured so much throughout history and we will prevail. All this challenged my view on

peace, hope and idealism. Ending a Jewish festival with such painful news was not something I could have imagined.

Can we find hope in despair? Can we find construction in destruction? Can we find humanity in horror? Can we find peace in war? Can we find commemoration in suffering? Can we find dialogue in hate? Can we find dreams in reality? Can we find meaning in meaninglessness? Can we find life in death? Can we bring our people home?

Probably these questions will stay as unanswered dilemmas. But they matter.

I will keep imagining a world with humans who can work to restore society and not work to destroy society. We have to stand together in solidarity to make a better impact on the world.

Following some criticism, here is my mini humble guideline: Expect that young people can achieve great things but don't expect that all have to meet those expectations. Give responsibility to the youth but also give educational opportunities. Learn about your culture and history. Stay informed about the world. Observe your environment. Everyone's time and efforts are valuable, including the young. Always be open-minded in learning and thinking differently. Every Jewish community might have diverse opportunities, challenges, and needs, and following a unitary modal might not apply to each. Common struggles and marginalized groups exist. Accept the realities and don't judge if someone is not as committed to community work as you. Be kind to yourself and to others. Respect people's preferences and differences. Support each other and don't exclude. Listen and communicate effectively within the Jewish communities and with the world at large. Have trust and care in each other.

The moral of the story is that life takes us to places and people, but it does not happen without any action and commitment.

Going back to the first quote, I commit myself, it is not my sole commitment but it is crucial. I also have a responsibility to the community and the world I live in, not only to pay back the support I have received but also to see a more fair and harmonious world.

Before I end my first official published autobiography, I hope I left the readers with interesting ideas that encourage them to think more about certain concepts. I hope I was able to give authenticity to the ones who know me already and to the ones who never heard my name. Maybe we can also be connected! I hope I can contribute even a little to the society and to my communities and motivate us to build bridges between diverse personalities and try to understand different communities.

To be continued...