



KALEIDOSCOPE

Questions of Identity



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I was born and raised in the western suburbs of Paris, in a quiet, wealthy, predominantly Christian town. I grew up with a little brother 3 years younger than me, and a little sister 9 years younger. Both my parents are French, rather traditional Jews. My father comes from the East of France, the regions of Alsace and Lorraine. On my mother's side, my grandparents were born and lived in Tunis during their childhood. Our religious practice has always been limited but regular, that is to say we celebrated the so-called main holidays: Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Hannukah, Pesach. We went to synagogue once a year, on Yom Kippur. Friday evening was reserved for the family, the five of us had dinner, or with my grandparents. The rest of the time, we behaved like all the other French people, except that we didn't eat pork.

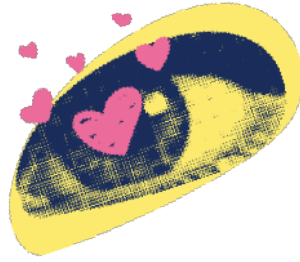
I did all my schooling in non-Jewish schools. I was often the only Jew in the class, or maybe there was another Jewish child in the class depending on the year. Every time I went back to school, it was the same refrain, my parents asking me if there were any other Jews in the class. Unable to answer, I listed the first and last names of my classmates and we made our predictions. It was when Yom Kippur arrived that we could or could not confirm our assumptions.

I remember that in primary school, all my friends went to religion classes and talked about it in the playground. I asked my mother why I was the only one who couldn't go. I felt like I was missing something. My mother answered me "You will go to Talmud Torah (Jewish religious school) soon, and you will see, it will be even more fun".

One afternoon, my best friend asked me what my religion was. I told her I was Jewish. I still remember her response: "I don't like the Jews, they are the ones who killed Jesus." This episode shocked me, and I talked about it with my parents who were offended by the stupidity of this child, and the fact that she must have heard that somewhere: from her parents, or well, at the religion classes. They took the opportunity to explain to me that we were certainly proud to be Jewish, but "we should not shout it from the rooftops". In other words, don't say you're Jewish unless someone asks you and you trust them enough to tell them.

It was around this age that my parents, taking advantage of a moment alone with me, began to talk to me about the Shoah, our history, our heritage. I had already briefly heard about the Second World War at school, but I had not yet grasped the scale of the events and how much it affected me. Part of my family died in Auschwitz because they were Jewish. I understood better why it was not necessary to "shout it from the rooftops".

At the age of 9, I started going to Talmud Torah on Tuesday evenings after school. Being a natural good student I was immediately very interested in learning more about Jewish history, the basics of Hebrew, and I learned prayers for the first time. We had a good laugh during the Hafsakah. I remember saying to my mother when I came home from my first class "It's crazy, I don't know them, but I feel like I already know them all". I felt really good and comfortable there. It was the first time I realized that we Jews have a connection as a people.

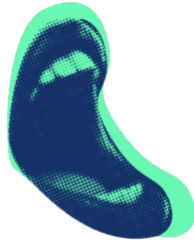


From the age of 10, I joined the EEIF (Jewish Scouts of France) of Neuilly Sur Seine, a Jewish scout movement. My little brother and I went to activities organized on Sundays, and to a summer and winter camp. I didn't particularly like the EEIFs. It wasn't my world. I enjoyed the noisy atmosphere, their humour and the songs that I still remember today. But I felt apart, too different, I didn't have their references, having grown up with very French and Christian children.

I went to Israel for the first time around the age of 10, with my family. I then discovered Jerusalem, Eilat, the Dead Sea, Metzadah which I had heard so much about at Talmud Torah. Then we went back once or twice. I appreciated being in a Jewish country where it was easy to shop or go to restaurants during Passover. I always felt good there. My aunt, uncle and cousins made Aliyah, which gave us another reason to travel there.

At 12, I was old enough to have my bat mitzvah, which was the subject of many discussions with my family. I was terrified of singing prayers, alone, in front of all my family and friends. We therefore decided to give up on having my bat mitzvah, although the idea remained in a corner of my head. It was finally at the age of 14 that I decided to take up Bat Mitzvah preparations, mainly because a good friend from my 4th grade class was taking the classes. During the year, we both decided to finally organize our Bat Mitzvah together. It was a memorable and very important moment for both of us, a way of reclaiming our belonging to the Jewish people.

High school was probably the time I strayed furthest from my Jewish identity. I didn't mix with any other Jews, apart from my family and the friend with whom I had done my Bat Mitzvah. I always remained proud to be Jewish, but I didn't talk about it or take an interest in it. I saw it as a heavy constraint having to stay with family on Friday evenings and holiday evenings. I was perfectly integrated into this very Christian environment. I was very studious, I spent most of my time studying, and I often went out with my friends. I told myself that my life would be different from that of my parents in many ways. I began to question the importance I wanted to give to Judaism. What ? In addition to having to party, I'm not allowed to love who I want? I found it unfair. I was almost sure: I would be the one to break the chain of Judaism in my family. I felt the heavy weight of the Jewish heritage that my parents tried to pass on to me as best they could. Did your ancestors die in vain at Auschwitz? They thought they must have missed something with me, and our relationship was strained. Your great-grandparents would be rolling over in their graves. I saw my religion as a burden more than an opportunity. During these years, I was torn, and I experienced an identity crisis as well as dilemmas between my French and humanist values and Judaism.



I then went to university in Paris. I tried, on the advice of my parents, to meet the members of the Jewish Student Union, but I felt like when I was a child at the EEIF, very different from these people who all came from Jewish schools. So, I spent my undergraduate years still very far from the Jewish community. The dilemmas presented themselves.

I still decided to participate in a Taglit trip during which I travelled from the North to the South of Israel with a group of young Jews my age. I really enjoyed the trip, exploring many places in Israel that I didn't know. For the first time, I went to Israel without my parents, and discovered the country in a different way. I enjoyed the trip, but once again failed to appreciate the young Jews I was traveling with. I was friends with a few participants who had the particularity of only being Jewish from one of their grandparents, and/or not considering themselves Jewish.

I went to several Jewish weddings during this period, including one that particularly struck me. The religious ceremony under the chuppah was particularly beautiful. Just after the ceremony, when we were going to congratulate the newlyweds, the bride said to me these words which I still remember: I wish you one day to have such a beautiful wedding...under the chuppah. Those words resonated for a long time and made me think. What do I really want? Getting married one day under the chuppah is what I wanted for myself too, I couldn't imagine it any other way. But I was convinced that this could never happen.

I felt like a stranger to the Jewish world, incompatible. My parents made fun of me for being anti-Semitic. Despite everything, being very sociable by nature, I always had this curiosity to meet Jews, and the desire to learn more. During a university exchange semester in the United States, I joined Hillel House, a Jewish student association that was more liberal and open than what I had known in France. I took a class every week on friendship and love in Judaism there, and I attended a few Friday evening services. I felt good there, I had the feeling of finally being faced with accessible and open Jews. This experience made me realize that there is a multitude of Jews, and that the Jews I had known in France were only a part of them. It gave me hope. Maybe I'll make Jewish friends one day after all, but they probably won't be French.

Having greatly appreciated this experience in the United States, after my return to Paris with my parents, I had only one obsession: to go abroad again.

After my Masters in Finance at Dauphine, I had to take a gap year by completing several internships. It was the perfect opportunity to do one of them abroad. My idea was originally to return to the United States. I reactivated a few contacts but quickly understood that it would be difficult. Obtaining an American visa sponsored by a company, finding accommodation knowing few people there...

I then thought about Israel, which seemed like an easier option. Being interested in the start-up investment industry, what could be more logical than doing an internship in Tel Aviv, the “Start Up Nation”?

I found an internship in an investment fund in start-ups for March 2022 and registered for an international Massa program which brings together young people between 18 and 30 years old who come to do an internship in Israel and organizes activities, Hebrew lessons, weekends. I was extremely anxious about going to Israel. I feared attacks and rockets and I had nightmares about them.

I lived five unforgettable months in Tel Aviv. During this time, I met Jews from all walks of life: from North and South America to Australia and South Africa.

I was particularly struck by this unity despite our diverse origins. And this goes well beyond religious practice or even faith, because we all had a connection and very different levels of practice.

From the first days, this connection and familiarity with the people I met made me feel at home. I developed an interest in Jewish holidays. I wanted to learn more and understand the practices. I went to the synagogue on Friday evenings with friends for Shabbat and I was transported by the songs and the faith that emanated from them. I was surprised and impressed by the warmth, open-mindedness and spontaneity of Israelis. I discovered another way of living that seemed to make people happier. I learned a lot about my Jewish identity throughout my time in Tel Aviv. I felt very happy, free, and as if reconciled with myself.

Very early in my trip, I dreaded my return to France. How would I explain to the people I meet the reasons for my stay in Israel? Should I hide the fact that I went to Israel?

With a very heavy heart, I returned to Paris in September to finish my studies. Everything seemed less bright, less vibrant than when I left. My mind was constantly searching for ways to recapture the warmth of Israel. I was looking for opportunities to go to the synagogue on Friday evenings to find that unique atmosphere that I missed so much. I went to most of the synagogues around my home, but nowhere found this warmth. I hosted Shabbat dinners, listened to Israeli music and tried to improve in Hebrew. I only wanted to return to Israel, and I took advantage of every week of vacation to go there.

At university, I was “the Jew” in my class, a label that made me uncomfortable. In the past, people who were not close to me did not know my religion. But after spending the last semester in Tel Aviv, Israel, it was obvious to everyone that I was Jewish.

The questions or jokes of my classmates, although sometimes perhaps based on good intentions, revealed a lack of knowledge, clumsiness and preconceived ideas which reminded me how complex it was to share such an experience with those who had not lived it, especially when they knew nothing about Israel and Judaism.

To cite just a few of the most notable examples: my first meeting with a boy in my class who asked me if I was Jewish, and who told me that he suspected it because I had “don’t take it the wrong way”, a “Semitic face, especially the nose”, then he continued with another joke about the fact that Jews are stingy. This same person who during the year made other little comments to me, for example, on the fact that “I am well connected”, implying that Jews have long arms, and other nonsense of that kind.

Another who asked me what was written on the hood of my down jacket (the name of the brand was written in large white letters), and who asked me if it said “TORAH”. Then some who told me that they visited a synagogue, or who asked me what I thought of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

This may not seem like much, but it was more than enough to make me feel uncomfortable and confirm my desire to return to Israel.

A few months after my return, it was obvious, I had to return to Israel.

I made Aliyah in April 2023.

