



Kippot and Clogs



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Israel holds a special place in my heart as I visit frequently, missing it when I'm away. My grandparents gained Dutch nationality in the 90s, leading my father to study and stay in the Netherlands. I often wonder how living in Israel would have influenced my identity, as the Netherlands shaped who I am.



I was born and raised in Amsterdam, Netherlands, as a child of two Israeli parents. My childhood was calm and pleasant, surrounded by a strong Israeli and Jewish community, thanks to my Jewish primary school and my parents' friends. At the time, I didn't think much about it, but later I became grateful for this environment. For instance, I speak fluent Hebrew because that's what I speak at home.

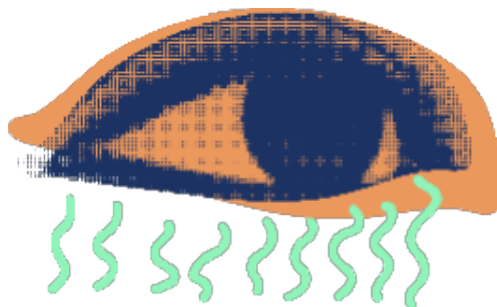
At the Jewish primary school in Amsterdam, I learnt a lot about Judaism. The boys wore kippahs, we prayed often, ate only kosher food, and had weekly *Yahadut* (Judaism) lessons. However, there was a stark contrast between what I learnt at school and what we practiced at home.

At home, we followed few Jewish customs, except for celebrating a few holidays. We did not observe Shabbat and rarely did Kiddush, but we always ate together. We only went to the synagogue if we were invited to a bar or bat mitzvah.

I am glad that I received this fundamental Jewish knowledge in primary school, although sometimes I feel like I know "nothing" about Judaism, especially compared to people who are more religious than I am.

For instance, I recently saw my neighbour hurrying outside with new pots in a plastic bag and a rope in his other hand. (For context: I live in a neighbourhood in Amsterdam where many Jewish families live.) I asked him what he planned to do with those pots and the rope and joked that he looked suspicious. After some googling and a hasty story from the neighbour, it turned out to be related to koshering kitchen utensils for the new kitchen. The more you know...

In primary school, I occasionally went to Tzofim Amsterdam (Israeli scouts), an activity my mother and aunt did for years when they were younger in Israel. For me, it wasn't really a success, probably due to the people who attended; I didn't really connect with them. I also never participated in Habonim or Bnei Akiva. In primary school, there were clear groups of children who belonged to one organisation or the other. I never felt like I was missing out, even then. Those camps just weren't my thing.



In primary school, I wasn't the easiest student, this continued in my high school education and eventually led to a switch in mindset. I was a busy boy, bouncing with ADHD, and always had something to say. A good example of this is how I behaved during the *Yahadut* lessons.

My teacher at that time was a highly respected and known rabbi in the Netherlands, something I can appreciate now but couldn't grasp as a 10-year-old. I was often sent out of the classroom because I was a distraction to the other students. When I was in the classroom, I asked difficult and critical questions. For example, I asked why boys are circumcised after the rabbi explained that we should

die in the same body we were born in.

Honestly, I can't remember his answers, just like his answer to the question of where God was during World War II. During parent-teacher meetings, he told my mother that I should become a philosopher. She joked that in Judaism, you just have a book you follow, without room for philosophy.

After primary school, I went to the Jewish high school across the street from the primary school. This was often a logical step for many, but it wasn't really my preference. However, due to the school lottery system, I ended up there. The Jewish high school was different than the primary, you no longer had to wear a kippah, you could eat non-kosher food, and there was no more praying unless you wanted to. I only stayed there for a year due to bad behaviour, a lack of creative classes at school, and poor grades in French...

With those dramatic grades, I wouldn't even be able to pass the year. Nevertheless, I had many friends there with whom I am still close today.

Eventually, I chose to go to a non-Jewish, creative oriented school. It was time to step out of the bubble, make new friends, discover other cultures, and step out of the familiar. This turned out to be the best choice I could have made. Now I have both Jewish friends from different cultures and non-Jewish friends from various religions and backgrounds. I highly value my friendships.

At my new, large high school, I had a great time, maybe too much. I loved nonsense and pulling pranks, which led to me being suspended again in my first month. My parents were not happy, but fortunately, I was allowed to continue and got good grades. It quickly became clear that my current study level was too easy for me, so I was moved to a higher level. That's when everything changed. I was circled by people who actually wanted to study. I became serious, started doing my best, and the title of most suspended student was no longer on my name. I graduated during COVID with ease and began thinking about my future and how to achieve my goals. Thanks to my mother, I learnt to think practically: what is the situation now and how do we reach the next goal?



Israel holds a special place in my heart; from a young age, I visit the country annually, sometimes even more often. When I'm not in Israel, I always miss it. I have a lot of family and friends there whom I always visit when I'm there. My grandparents, my father's parents, obtained Dutch nationality in the 90s when my grandfather worked for El Al. This led to my father moving to the Netherlands to study. Otherwise, I probably would have lived in Israel, and I often wonder what that would have been like for me.

Would I be the same person? I think the environment here in the Netherlands has strongly shaped who I am now.

An experience I will never forget is my participation in Birthright (Taglit) in the summer of 2023. I still look back on that time with great pleasure, together with friends I made there who are now amongst my dearest.

If I could give advice to anyone hesitating to go on Birthright, I would say: do it immediately. I already knew many people in the group, some by face, but not everyone. What I found special was that while everyone was Jewish, not everyone had a connection to Israel. In fact, one of my best friends had never been to Israel.

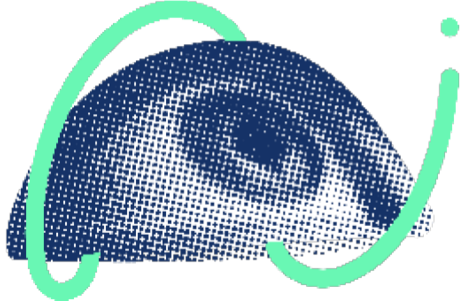
I found that hard to grasp, as Israel is truly a second home for me. It was beautiful to see her experience Israel for the first time.

During our trip, we saw a lot: from kibbutzim and tunnels under Jerusalem to the nightclubs of Tel Aviv. The most fun was meeting new people and laughing a lot. For example, when we were sitting in the middle of the desert, stinking, unwashed, barefoot, and sleeping on a mat, only to be woken up at four in the morning to climb Masada.

Another beautiful story is that of a boy whose mother is Jewish and father is Christian. He had never been to a synagogue, but after our visit to a synagogue on Shabbat, a new world opened up for him. He sat next to me in the synagogue and said confidently, "I know what I'm going to do; Saturday I'll go to the synagogue and Sunday to the church." We laughed very hard at that.

Actually, I should be in Israel now for my studies. I was accepted to an exchange program at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, where I would focus on design, which I also study. It would have been the first time I experienced Israel as a real resident, not as a tourist or vacationer. I was supposed to leave in February this year, but due to the war, the plans changed and my school did not grant permission to go. However, my connection to Israel is not over. I must and will live there one day. I want to experience it myself. It cannot be that I am Israeli, feel so, and introduce myself as such to people, but have never actually lived there.

When people ask me where I come from or what my background is, I always say that I am Dutch-Israeli. Something I am proud of. I will never lie about who I am, who my family is, or where we come from. Since October 7, and actually always, I feel like a representative of Israel. For many people, I am the first Israeli they meet. I feel responsible for portraying a good image, especially since the war. I want to show that I am just like them and they are just like me. I notice that people are often curious about Israel or Judaism, and I gladly answer their questions. It is very different to hear something from the media than from someone who experiences it themselves.



Being Jewish is one thing, but also being attracted to men? How does that work? At a young age, I knew I was attracted to men. When I was sure, I immediately told my friends. This was around my bar mitzvah, maybe a little before. I never had a problem with it. I knew well to whom I could tell and my friends always reacted openly and understandingly. There were moments in the past when I preferred to stay quiet about it, but eventually, I thought: if you don't want anything to do with me, fine, then not. I've always kept that mentality, also in other areas. I'm very easy-going, maybe too easy-going sometimes, but I don't let people walk over me quickly.

So far, I have had two serious relationships, both almost a year long. One partner was very interested in Judaism, Israel, history, and my Israeli family. The other partner only asked after a year what Shabbat was when I celebrated it again with family and friends.

How does Judaism view homosexuality? I don't know; I've never researched it. Honestly, I don't care much. I don't need another opinion, and nothing will change me anyway.

If you were to ask me if I believe in God, I would stare at you for a while, furrow my brow, shrug my shoulders, and say "meh." I'm happy to be Jewish and wouldn't have it any other way. For me, being Jewish means tradition, holidays, and above all, unity. Wherever you go in the world, you always have your people, people you can always turn to and share something beautiful with. Judaism, to me, is the feeling of family and pride, proud to walk with my Star of David.



I'm not exactly sure what the future holds for me. I can see myself having a family with kids, that's something I would really want. I also want to pass Judaism on to my children.

Right now, I'm happy with what I'm doing career wise. I completed an internship as an illustrator at Het Parool which is an Amsterdam newspaper, gained work experience in marketing at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, worked at The HEINEKEN Company, and most importantly, my role as coordinator at the Kaleidoscope Project.

What started as a spontaneous application through a Jewish Amsterdam network group has grown into my current job. I'm extremely happy that I can apply my skills here and continue to learn and grow so much. The challenges that come my way, especially setbacks, teach me to think outside the box.

Working on a project focused on preserving and cherishing contemporary Jewish stories in Europe gives me tremendous strength and energy. Especially in these times, it feels good to make a positive contribution. It gives me satisfaction to know that I'm helping to put Judaism on the map for

future generations.

Through Kaleidoscope, last Hanukkah, I had the opportunity to attend Limmud Festival in Birmingham, UK. This was my first time at such an event, and I had no idea what to expect. At first, it was a bit overwhelming with all the new information, lectures, and hundreds of new faces. On the first day, I found myself suddenly singing Jewish humanistic songs, something I had absolutely never done before. I really thought to myself, where have I ended up?

I quickly made friends and attended lectures that I found interesting. I learned about Jewish history in the animation world and about how to discuss war. At Limmud, all kinds of Jews come together. I had never seen so many women wearing kippahs before; that took some getting used to. The only time I had seen women wearing kippahs before was at the liberal synagogue in Amsterdam where I went for a saxophone performance with my former music band.

There were also many people and lectures about Israel. Many were positive and informative, but there were also critical voices, some even against the state of Israel. That was a bit of a mental shift because everyone in my surroundings shares the same opinion and values about Israel. Limmud was also the very first time for me celebrating Shabbat without a phone. I had never done that before, but it surprisingly felt easy because it was so enjoyable with everyone. I made some friends at Limmud, for which I am very grateful. I'm still in touch with some of them. The last time I was in London, I met up with a friend I had met there.

By the time I'm 21, I'll be graduated from college. After that, I'd like to travel with my best friend, who is currently in the IDF (Israel Defence Forces). She's also Dutch, not from an Israeli family. We attended the Jewish elementary school together, and she lived a few streets away from me. She joined the IDF about six months before the war that began on October 7 and is now in combat. She will finish her service a few months after I graduate.

After traveling, I'm considering pursuing a Master's degree and then working. Strangely enough, I'm really looking forward to that; I love working and being busy. There's so much satisfaction to be gained from doing something you really enjoy. Ideally, I see myself working as an Art Director or Creative Director at a large company later on. There are still steps to take to get there, but that's no problem for me. I'm optimistic.

For now, I'll be enjoying my summer with friends and family, scream my lungs out at the festival I'm attending and rot away on the beach in the beautiful hot sun.

