



KALEIDOSCOPE

Shedding light into the darkness



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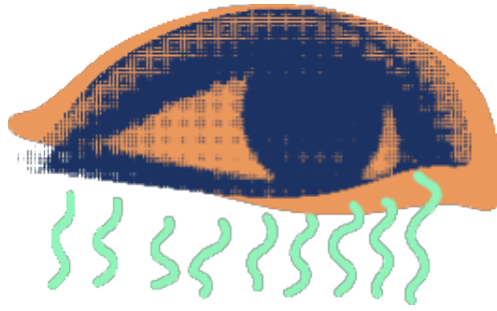
I don't just mean that in a figurative sense. My understanding of being Jewish came not from active rituals in everyday family life, but from the sight of the hamsa in my babushka's entrance hall, and the little rabbi clay figurines on our living room sideboard. There were the mezuzot on all our front doors, the Hanukkia on the bookshelf, the Chabad calendar and the little magnets from Israel on the fridge. All these little everyday things reminded me of being Jewish - and this was necessary, because without them my knowledge of it would certainly have been lost. I fit perfectly into the perspective that so many post-Soviet Jews insist on: having grown up secular, and yet to build one's entire cultural self-image on Judaism.

The fairy lights metaphor is also apt in that I actually found being Jewish to be a sparkling glow in my life. Although I was repeatedly instructed by my grandparents not to broadcast that I was Jewish, I unflinchingly shared my culture with anyone who asked. I saw it as my task to shed light on the dark lack of knowledge of my German classmates, who could only imagine Jews as dead people and Hasidic rabbis - images to which I felt no connection whatsoever. So I became a secular 'ambassador', and the phrase 'ethnically and culturally Jewish' became an essential part of my vocabulary.



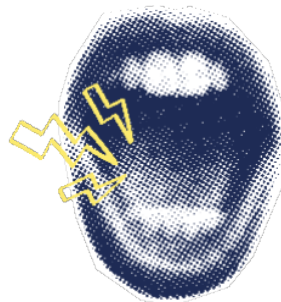
I saw my Jewishness as an adornment, even though it in no way determined my habits. Well, except for the annual music competition in my Jewish community, where I and my peers were sent to the front of the stage one after the other to play Schubert, trembling. Meanwhile, our post-Soviet parents, lined up and equipped with video cameras, documented their own child with such pride as if the next (unbaptised!) Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy was sitting there. Afterwards, you were told that the granddaughter of a friend of Babushka's had played better, but you were nonetheless filled with relief - because you knew that you would now be spared this performative torture for a whole year. For the first 12 years of my life, these music competitions were the only occasions on which I went to the Jewish community.

And yet even then, even before I was capable of developing a concept of legacy, I felt that by being Jewish there was a hopeful component to my story that instilled pride and responsibility in me and made me part of a larger entity. So a spark of spirituality was always there, even in the midst of this secular childhood, and it was finally ignited thanks to Netzer.



Netzer Germany e.V. is a Reform Zionist association that organises camps for Jewish children and young people. My parents found out about it by chance and probably didn't expect that I would return from one participation so changed and enthusiastic. I now believe that many children remember their first Machane as a similar feeling of pure euphoria. I realised many things at my first Machane that I had never imagined before: that religion could be beautiful, and that there were more like me. Russian-speaking. Jewish to the core while raised completely and utterly secular.

After my first machane, I suddenly no longer felt the need to describe myself exclusively as secular anymore. I had finally experienced religion as something that united and created community instead of dividing. We sat and prayed together, filling the room with sounds and intentional, familiar words that spread joy. Clothing was - at most - a gateway to self-expression, and to me it was a relief to be in a Jewish environment where the way I dressed was not viewed as something right or wrong. In Kabbalat Shabbat, we created something together, and for the first time I could see religion as a process of creativity and collaboration. Even countless years and services later, the memory of that first Shabbat gives me goosebumps and gratitude. A new world opened up to me, and I spent a lot of time in the years that followed exploring more thoroughly what position I could occupy in it, and it in my life.



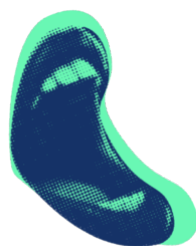
It wasn't long until I felt the desire to make up for my bat mitzvah. I too wanted to officially complete and celebrate my religious maturity and be allowed to wear my own tallit at the shacharit. However, it was clear to me that this could only happen in a Reform Jewish institution. The solution that was adopted once again reflects the typically Jewish elements of my biography. As a child of Jewish immigrants, it was a matter of course that my family was scattered throughout the diaspora. This naturally included the most typical destination for Jewish emigration after Israel: the USA. There in America, in a small democratically voting university town, with a kosher section in the supermarket, mazel tov postcards for every occasion in every stationery shop, a Jewish section in the cemetery, and 'Happy Holidays' instead of 'Merry Christmas' banners in December, my grandparents and aunt had settled down. It was also there that I experienced a Reform Jewish congregation for the first time. We were visiting for Rosh Hashana and I welcomed the new Jewish year in a large room with stained glass windows under the guidance of a kippah-wearing rabbi. So the idea was born and the decision was made that I should make up for my Bat Mitzvah here.

My Bat Mitzvah was nothing like the teenage (nightmare) dream in Adam Sandler's new Netflix film. Instead, still in pre-pandemic times, I prepared for months with a teacher via online lessons. The ceremony itself took place on a Saturday morning, and apart from my family, the attendance of parishioners was very limited. I didn't promise myself a single reading, faced stimulating discussion questions and answers after my Dvar Torah, and finally the cantor performed a song for me on his guitar. Afterwards, we didn't celebrate in a rented room with a long guest list and DJ, but exclusively in a family circle in my favourite restaurant: a Mexican restaurant where you were allowed to smash a chocolate pinhata for dessert. It was perfect from start to finish.

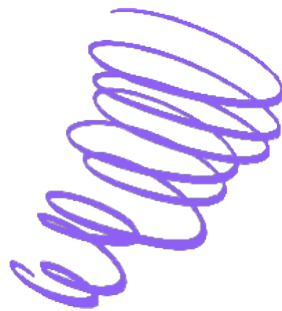
At the time, I saw the Bat Mitzvah as the culmination of my spiritual quest - me, without parents or family connection, finding the religious side of Judaism and living it out in my own way.

Of course, that was a hasty conclusion.

Even more Jewish than my chutzpah is the constant urge to re-evaluate that is anchored in me. And so, over the last few years, I have been able to constantly learn and rekindle my curiosity.



I used my Jewishness as a starting point for educational seminars and trips. I experienced Jewish normalcy during my year abroad in Michigan, where the local Hillel could easily fill 2000 seats for a regular Shabbat dinner. During the same time, I learned about Reconstructionism and interned at an egalitarian Conservative congregation - although I had previously thought these two adjectives were mutually exclusive. I realised that it was the immigrant character of the Jewish community in Germany that was familiar to me - and thus Jewish normality in America felt foreign. I took a Jewish studies course that introduced me to Jewish thinkers such as Arthur Green, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Lawrence Kushner and the American Jewish phenomenon of 'spiritual, but not religious'. One Shabbat evening, I found myself sitting on the floor of a dormitory in a circle with other Reform Jewish students. If I had to describe my Reform Judaism, it would be through this moment: we all came from completely different corners of the world. We had all been socialised Jewishly in different ways. We all performed 'One Day' by Matisyahu together. We all knew the lyrics inside out.



After 7 October, I suddenly found myself tumbling into a parallel world, shielded from mainstream Western society, and as a result, the expression of my Jewishness, which had previously been of a purely personal and spiritual nature, turned into public, political activism.

And so it goes on.

In my childhood, my babushka often read to me in Russian while I sipped her borscht. To this day, one of my favourite read-aloud works is the biography of the Jewish author Aleksandra Burshteyn, who survived both world wars and reminisces about her childhood in this book. The title of the book is 'Doroga uchodit v dalj' - 'The road leads into the distance'. That also applies to me. My path leads into the distance, and it continues to be illuminated by the continuous string of lights that Judaism represents to me. There is no finish line waiting at the end. No bat mitzvah or other experience will ever serve as the culmination or conclusion of my Jewish path, for as long as I live and think, I do so in the Jewish way - wondering and wandering.