



The "Favorite Jew"



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Growing up in a small town in northern Germany, I was, for many people, their first encounter with a Jewish person. Time and again, I'd hear comments like, "You're the first Jew I've ever met." Or, "You don't even look Jewish." People only knew about Jews through stories – so meeting someone who didn't wear a black suit, didn't have sidelocks (peyes), and was just a regular person was surprising to many. That's also how they treated me: as something unexpected. My kippah was called a "holy prayer cap," and if it ever fell off, someone would immediately ask, "Are you going to hell now, or will you die on the spot?"

It's astonishing how a religion can be so present and yet so distant at the same time. Most people only know about Judaism in the context of the Holocaust. The fact that there are still Jews today is often forgotten – not out of malice, but simply because of the lack of everyday visibility. Even I didn't know any other Jews in my town. So how could anyone else?



Over time, people got used to it. They stopped asking why I was often absent or why I didn't go out with them on Saturdays. But I was never truly treated as the same. Somehow, I'm one of them, yet also different. My religion only feels "normal" when I'm at the Chabad center in Hamburg on Sundays. There, I don't have to explain why I don't eat pork. There, I can simply live my Jewish identity. But as soon as I leave the synagogue or the Chabad school, I'm back to being the outsider. The one people avoid making Holocaust jokes around – as if I'm the problem and not the joke itself.

Jewish life can't just be lived in these rare, isolated settings. At home, I can wear my tzitzit openly without fear of insults. I don't have to hide my kippah and worry about suddenly having to answer for the conflicts in Israel. But that's my reality: either I hide my identity, or I accept that I'll face antisemitism. It's always been this way. So I'm not surprised when my parents ask me, for my own safety, not to wear a Star of David necklace. No matter how much I try to downplay my Jewish identity in everyday life, for many, I'm still just "the Jew" or even their "favorite Jew" – because apparently, that's what makes me stand out.

So where can I truly live my culture? At holiday camps like J-Arteck? There, I finally spend time with other Jewish youth, embrace my culture, and learn more about it without constantly needing to explain. It's a relief to wake up in the morning and not have to explain why the first thing I do is wash my hands. But even that ends after two weeks at most.



Whenever I talk about Judaism, it's almost always about the Shoah. It's an important subject, but Judaism is not only the Shoah. For many people, though, that's all they see. A mix of pity and shame appears whenever Judaism is discussed – coupled with a palpable lack of knowledge and experience. Sometimes, I'll hear things like, "Isn't your Christmas coming up soon?" or "I saw on TikTok that your holiday Surot (meaning Sukkot) is coming up."

I can hardly blame them. Judaism, partly because of its history, is rarely part of everyday life. And when it is discussed, it's often with extreme caution. The Shoah always hovers in the background, an unspoken part of every conversation. And the Middle East conflict doesn't make it any easier. I'm increasingly afraid of openly showing my religion. When people do bring it up, it's rarely about my culture or traditions, but almost always about the conflict with Palestine. Suddenly, I'm asked how I feel about it or what I have to say on the topic – as if I'm automatically an expert, just because I'm the only Jew they know. Both Muslims and we Jews get drawn into this issue, despite having no part in it.

These questions weigh on me. I want to preserve my Jewish roots – the traditions, the culture, the values that matter to me. But it's hard, because for many, Judaism is only about the past or political conflict. Yet there's so much more to us, something we live every day. But that's rarely talked about.

In the end, I'm left with two choices: either I move to Israel, or I remain forever the "favorite Jew."

