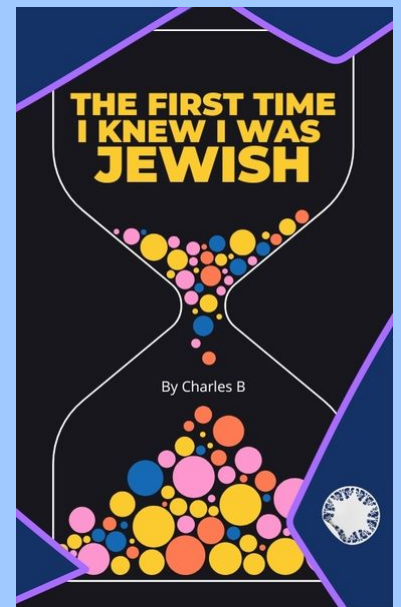




KALEIDOSCOPE

The First Time I Knew I Was Jewish



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The first time I knew I was Jewish was when my brother and I were sat at a very Jewish table, full of our very Jewish family, in a very Jewish restaurant. Across from us was sat our very Jewish grandmother, and our very Jewish cousins.



For my dad, a convert, he found his own way to Judaism, so it is really to his credit that he, along with my mum, shielded me from antisemitism for so long, whilst providing me with a real Jewish childhood. I fondly remember Friday evening services, sat with my dad in shul, singing Lecha Dodi, playing with his tallis. I remember Channukah, lighting the Chanukiah, which my mum made for my brother and I, and which we light to this day.

The first time I knew I was Jewish should have been, to borrow the words of Jewish comedian Alex Edelman, eight days in. In reality it wasn't. As a young kid growing up in North West London (which is about as Jewish as a salmon and cream cheese bagel), I was never *made* conscious of my Jewishness, despite never attending Jewish school, and having few Jewish friends.



The first time I knew I was Jewish was not when I attended Jewish Sunday school, and learnt about the foreign history and alphabet of my ancestors. In fact, the first time I knew I was Jewish was not even when I played for a Jewish football team.

No, the first time I knew I was Jewish was when my brother and I were sat at a very Jewish table, full of our very Jewish family, in a very Jewish restaurant. Across from us was sat our very Jewish grandmother, and our very Jewish cousins.

I love my cousins more than anything in this world. They are my best friends and we have shared so much of our time together. From each freezing Sukkot, to every last Bar Mitzvah, and with all our kosher Chinese dinners on the way, we have lived our lives together through the Jewish calendar.

That being said, we are different in some ways. No doubt, our religious practices differ, with my family being Reform and my cousins being Modern Orthodox. My cousins have always attended Jewish schools, whilst my brother and I have attended secular schools. Our cousins are kosher, whilst we, largely, are not.

This may explain why my youngest cousin, out of the blue asks me and my brother 'You're not Jewish are you?'. I was perplexed. After all, it was never something that I'd been forced to confront before, in my sheltered upbringing. What was my answer?

Well, on one hand I knew I wasn't Jewish in the same sense as my cousins. They were Jewish with a capital J and, to my mind, I was more jew-ish.

However, there was another, stronger, part of me that recognised that there was, still something Jewish about me, though I couldn't explain it.

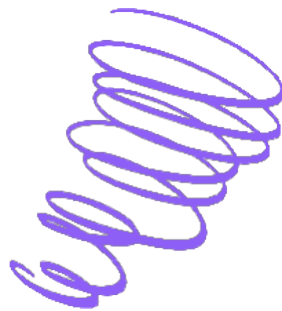
The question, to tell the truth, I'm sure, was motivated largely by my cousin's youth and lack of information, due to his grounding in the 'Jewish bubble' of North West London. Nevertheless, it got me thinking – what did Judaism mean to me and *for* me?



Thus, between this time and the second occasion I recognised I was Jewish, I educated myself. I had my bar mitzvah, which I'm honoured to say my whole family attended. I joined FZY, the Federation of Zionist Youth, which I am proud to say I remain a member of to this day. And finally, and most importantly, I began to speak up for myself at school.

Around this time, people at school expressed surprise that I was Jewish, after all, my name is not very Jewish and I had, apparently, rarely mentioned it. I was not aware of this fact, because, to me, my Judaism was second nature.

So I pivoted, from having a passive identity to being consciously Jewish. I'm grateful to say most people at school had no issue with this.



But this all changed one Saturday morning. I woke up early in my final year of school to do tutoring. October 7th. Naturally, I immediately went on my phone and saw I had an unusual number of notifications. I checked Twitter and saw scenes of unimaginable brutality.

Immediately I checked in with my Israeli friends, who primarily live in the far north and the Negev. They were in a living hell. Most I didn't hear from for hours, as they were in bomb shelters, confused and scared.

Every day since then I have received dozens of notifications from my Red Alert app, telling me that my friend's house who I stayed with last summer is being bombed.

Every day since then I have been conscious of my Jewishness.

On that day, life itself changed. Truly, life has not yet gone back to normality, and it cannot begin to until 101 of our brothers and sisters are returned home safely.

The next day two things happened. An old friend of mine and I got into a terrible argument about Israel – I have yet to speak to him since. Secondly, and something I had been looking forward to for ages, was football.

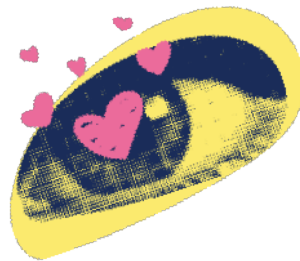
As I say, love football. Football matches with my dad and trips up to Manchester are some of my best memories. And it doesn't get bigger for me than Manchester City vs Arsenal. October 8th, a top of the table clash, on paper an exciting game- lots of shots, cards and drama.

But I felt nothing, knowing that the next day I would have to return to school.

School, a place that for so long had allowed me to be consciously and independently Jewish. A place that, largely, did not care about my Jewishness. A place filled with people that now really did care about my Jewishness, and not in a positive sense. A place that would now become more and more difficult to navigate for the last months of my school career.

Another unforeseen factor that increased antisemitism and anti-Zionism would have in the months following October 7th was that it affected which universities I would feel comfortable attending. As traditionally Jewish-friendly universities seemed to morph into deeply disagreeable spaces, my options seemed to shrink.

In the months following October 7th, I had been made conscious of my Jewishness in a destructive and worrying cycle. It had become toxic because my Judaism had become defined by outside forces; by people who sought to deny my identity rather than affirm it.



So I moved to Israel for a year, on FZY Year Course. This was the third time I knew I was Jewish.

Here, every day is an opportunity to explore my Judaism in a creative, constructive and healthy way. I have learnt so much about myself, Israel and my religion and I have become a better person as a result.

Over the years, I have let my Judaism and Zionism be defined by others, for better and for worse, and whilst I will always be inspired by my heroes; Rabin, Maimonides, Borochoy and Me'ir, and above all, my amazing parents, I have realised that it is me who is in control of my identity and my destiny. I can forge my own path forwards and I can be my own person. I am a Jew.

