



KALEIDOSCOPE

Discovering the gift of being Jewish



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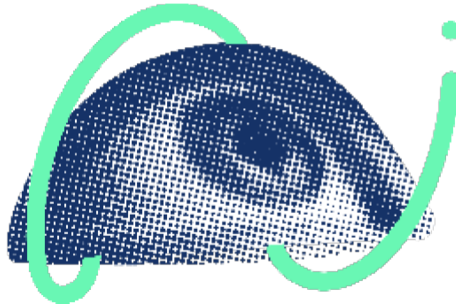
My Judaism has always been a part of my identity, even though my family is not religious and never has been. Although I didn't know what it meant to be a religious Jew until a few years ago, I was always aware that it distinguished me from my classmates. In the evenings, my mother, my siblings, and I would say the Shema, and a few times we played with the dreidel and chocolate coins during Hanukkah. Since there are no Jewish kindergartens or schools in Aachen, a city in western Germany, I found myself among a small number of Muslim children & teenagers as the only one who didn't celebrate Christmas or Easter, the only one who didn't experience First Communion with its preparations. At that time, I didn't know how much beauty the spiritual maturity of a Bat Mitzvah carries or that it is a great reason to celebrate. It simply was never part of my Jewish practice and awareness. Sometimes, I wished I were Christian. Now, looking back, I am shocked at how alienated I was.



We often visited the Jewish community in Aachen with my mother (who, through her mother and siblings, who I never met, instilled Jewish roots in her three children – my two siblings and I). I am grateful for the positive memories of Purim parties with sweets, concerts, family BBQs, outings and programs with the youth center— as a child, they gave me a sense of belonging. However, in my view, it was more of a gathering of contingent refugees, a meeting place for Russian-speaking families with similar backgrounds, where the aspect of Judaism was never fully in focus—on good days, we might have a Minyan on Shabbat or holidays. Jewish education and culture were not a priority, it was more about the human gathering with a Jewish undertone. But as I got older and, at 14, learned about Machanot through the community youth center, I immediately signed up. I remember the joy and new impressions I had, both socially and religiously. I had never felt I could blend into the rigid German culture. I think that was the first time my Jewish soul was given room to exist within me. Starting from my first Machane, I decided to stop eating pork and to separate milk and meat. National Jewish events and gatherings outside the small Aachen community gave me more insight into Jewish life. Though not in the sense of authentic religiosity (observing the commandments), I still felt closer to them than to my fellow people in Aachen. I remember the constant state of curiosity, the search for answers from rabbis when I had the chance to ask—why are things the way they are in Judaism? Why all the commandments? What does it mean to live as a Jew?

However, keeping Shabbat or a fully kosher diet was far from my reality. Yet this clearly does not contradict my involvement in the Jewish world—I always wore my necklace with the Menorah and participated in Jewish life, albeit passively. Fortunately, antisemitism was rarely part of my reality (I must add that I was never publicly recognized as Jewish—this likely played a significant role in my personal experience with antisemitism).

Of course, Israel is always a topic in Jewish circles, and so, at 15 or 16, the idea came up to travel to Israel for a year after school to understand what the land of the Jews is all about. And so, Judaism remained a passive aspect of my identity throughout my youth, usually expressed as the mention of my name in class when the topic of the Holocaust came up—Esther the Jew... in Germany, something most people encounter only in history books. This association with the Jewish people, defined solely by my blood and minimal cultural involvement, would change in the future.



Over the next 2-3 years, many changes came that led me on a path of spirituality—unaffected by my Judaism, because in wearing skirts and turning off my phone on Saturdays, I didn't find a connection to my soul and the hidden aspects of the world. Ultimately, this connection to my thirst for meaning and spiritual connection to Judaism came through the book *Worldmask* (by Rabbi Akiva Tatz). Thank you, Hashem. I found it while looking for a new book in my sister's bookshelf. It was my introduction to Chassidut, the teachings of the Chassidic movement, which makes the esoteric aspect of the Torah accessible to the ordinary person. It describes our human connection to Kabbalistic, spiritual concepts—how we can align the physical and the unseen, intangible elements of the world that influence us. This was the beginning of my transformation from an interest in spirituality to a deep connection with Godliness. I realized that the essence of Judaism is not defined by dry "restrictions," but rather by the physical expressions of spiritual laws and principles. It is these illuminations about higher principles and latent worlds, which are hidden from man, that I was searching for. Now I understood that Judaism could answer all my questions—on a deeper, more personal level, accessible through the commandments and bringing God into the picture. I believe this is when I first recognized God as the governing force, the source of all life.

The result of this new light on my perception followed shortly thereafter: I began, initially less regularly, but steadily over time, to attend our synagogue for Kabbalat Shabbat and Kiddush every Friday. My thought: my relationship with God is like that with any person—if I do someone a favor, if I invest time in them, they will surely reciprocate! Since we know what God wants from us through His commandments, and my intention is to live in harmony with the governing power of the world and cooperate with it for my benefit, it follows that I would bring Shabbat into my life! It was quite a drastic difference from the lives of those around me, and it wasn't always easy, especially in the face of the people in the synagogue, which were much older than me and didn't necessarily make it an exciting Friday evening activity.

The eventual connection to and learning through Chabad in Aachen, which introduced me to Torah from the philosophy of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, clarified the importance of adjusting my lifestyle. I started learning the Tanya, about the Jewish soul, and the spiritual structure of this world—until it was time to begin my year in Israel.

At that time, for me, it was primarily the longed-for escape from German society, but in retrospect, it was perfectly in sync with the awakening of my Jewish soul. What I didn't expect upon arriving in Israel in September 2023 was that my life would never be the same. I was given the opportunity to find my identity as a Jew and understand what role it plays within me—because, growing up in Germany, I was never Ukrainian enough to be Ukrainian, nor was I rooted in the German culture, which was always foreign to my family. In Israel, I found the craziest mixture of countries, cultures, skin and hair colors, and languages—and yet we are all connected, all part of one nation, all equal even though we are so different. For the first time, I felt complete belonging, and the struggle of defining my identity could rest. For the first time, I could see what it means to live Judaism authentically and naturally, rather than inorganically as a minority in alienation.

The other young people in the gap-year program were mostly seeking fun and social relationships before diving into adulthood. In this environment, it often felt frustrating to be on a quest for truth and identity—but I am grateful for the experiences and insights, and the challenges that have helped me come closer to my core.

Without asking questions, strangers welcomed me into their homes for Shabbat, without knowing me or expecting anything in return. I quickly realized how, in Israel, almost every Jew is family, even if you haven't met them before—despite how much the Jewish people are characterized by so many differences. This unity is something that for many Jews growing up in a Jewish community is taken for granted. For me, someone who thought the whole world was structured like German society, this new awareness surpassed my greatest utopia. In this year, I came to the realization that my Judaism will shape the rest of my life—the friends I choose, the way I shape my family, and above all, my goals as a person. The more Jewish families and individuals I met, the more I understood that I also want to live in such a way that values and boundaries actually give a person freedom—an entirely unknown concept in the Western world. This led to me, by the end of the program, gradually stopping wearing pants, learning to appreciate modesty and tradition, and, completely naturally, incorporating the honoring of Shabbat and many other commandments into my standard. In my free time, I constantly tried to understand the Torah in a deeper and more holistic way, and the pull toward it grew stronger over time. Therefore, I did not pursue my planned next step of enlisting in the IDF, as a deep contemplation made it clear to me that it would drown out my spiritual search—my journey had to continue, and the army would not provide the space for that.



Now, I have been studying at a Midrasha in Tzfat for about four months. The Torah and Chassidut are continually changing me and allowing me to be a better, more vigilant, and wiser person. It gives me an understanding of myself and of life, and I am going through a constant shift in consciousness—far deeper than any psychedelic drug, revealing new depths of existence. Tzfat is a special place that attracts all kinds of Jews from around the world seeking spirituality. I am incredibly grateful to have found this path, which fills me with meaning and joy, and I am even more grateful to have been born Jewish and to be part of this wonderful people, to have the opportunity to learn God's word in this holy land of our ancestors and live according to His will.

None of my family members are religious or, to my knowledge, have ever been. My mother, my grandmother, and my great-grandmother were the only Jewish relatives I knew, and none of them married Jewishly or were religious. Today, I am more or less an integrated part of the religious community (which is not equivalent to the Jewish community), while all my friends and family from the first 18 years of my life have no connection to my Judaism or the life it shapes. They accept my path, and maybe they admire the way I live it with such devotion, but none of them can imagine walking a similar path. Sometimes, it feels lonely and a bit frustrating because this path of beauty and depth is open to them at any time, yet they find no allure in it. Every soul has its own journey, and I am aware that I cannot impose my inner life on my family.

It gives me a strong sense of meaning to be able to bring Judaism back into my family after generations of alienation in the Soviet Union, to create a spiritual light, to make an active connection to the covenant we, as the Jewish people, have with God, and to hopefully see the next generation, as well as my siblings and their children, lead a more Jewishly influenced life.

