

## Fractions

I am half Jewish by way of my father. So, depending on who you talk to, that means I'm not Jewish at all. My children are happy to point out they are more Jewish than me. Having heard me refer to myself as half Jewish, they announce that they are whole Jewish. I took issue with my fractional state after becoming a mother to my technically one quarter Jewish children. Learning about my heritage and becoming part of a larger community was suddenly essential now that there were two little Jews involved.

I began a fervent search for a synagogue diverse enough to accommodate our various fractions of Judaism, including my husband of 18 years who was not Jewish at all. I began my search at Neveh Shalom. Many years ago my father took me to a Friday night service there, so it has stuck in my mind as the first synagogue I ever attended. My father was bar-mitzvahed at Neveh Shalom and while I was taking a class there recently I discovered my grandparents and great-grandparents Yartzheit plaques hanging on the sanctuary wall. Al Grant, born Abraham Golbaum, was my father's father. He became Al Gold as a tap dancing musician in the 30's and later, as a record store owner in downtown Portland, he decided to change the family name to Grant. Not very Jewish sounding. Nonetheless, the names of Al and Celia Grant hang on the wall of Neveh Shalom and assuming my home was where my Jewish family lingered, I had my first conversation about synagogue membership with Rabbi Brad, the new assistant Rabbi at Neveh Shalom. I was informed very kindly that I could not join without first converting. "Okay, sign me up," I said. I'd already taken the intro class.

"Generally speaking," said the Rabbi, "I hold my converts to a higher standard than my regular congregants. I would expect you to keep kosher, at least to some degree. And if you are

raising children, it is very important they get a consistent message by only observing Jewish holidays in your home.”

“Convert? But I’m not actually a convert,” I told him. “I’m already half Jewish. I just happen to be the wrong half.”

I was actually intrigued by the idea of experimenting with kashrut. But I became a little nervous about the issue of Christmas. My husband had made clear he was never giving up Christmas for me. And the Rabbi had just described how there were inter-faith families at Neveh who were actually raising their children in both religions. That was surprising to me and did not describe my situation at all. Christmas, even for my husband, had nothing whatsoever to do with religion. “Rabbi,” I asked. “If these inter-faith couples can join your synagogue, then why can’t I? I’m raising my children to only be Jewish.”

“Well,” he pondered as if maybe I had stumbled upon a loophole. But no, “In the case of these couples,” he said, “one of them actually is Jewish already.”

I began to fume over the randomness of parentage and genetics. Was my mother more important than my father? I reminded Rabbi Brad of my paternal lineage. To which he inquired, “Have you taken the class yet on Halakha?” Oy. I know there’s no such thing as being half Jewish according to Jewish law. There is no fractional representation of the state. Like being pregnant, you either are or you aren’t.

But Halakha fails to take into consideration the half of my family tree to which I feel the strongest connection. It is difficult to articulate the essence of one’s soul. Some people might refer to me as a Jew by choice. I agree, in that all practicing Jews are to some extent making a choice to continue being Jewish, to identify themselves as such. It is a conscious decision. But

for me, as for many, it goes deeper. Do we choose to be who we are on the inside? Maybe it boils down to a rejection of my other half. That is a distinct possibility.

In my conversation with Rabbi Brad, the biggest sticking point, if you will, was regarding the conversion of my children. For one thing, that wouldn't make sense to them, being already whole Jewish as they are. And for another thing, well, I have two boys. Because I'm Jewish there was never a question as to whether or not they would be circumcised. But circumcision by a non-Jewish pediatrician is not kosher. And frankly I have no idea what day it happened for either boy. I was in a post-surgery daze for the first several weeks following each birth, which if I'm really honest, extended to the first year of each new life. Now that they are ages three and six, I just may be emerging from the fog. Only to be informed that if my boys are to ever be bar-mitzvahed at the same synagogue as their grandfather, they would need to undergo the hat-afat-dam-brit ritual. Just a pin prick, a tiny draw of blood at the circumcision site. Nothing really. Hmmm. I'm not so sure my boys would agree. And I know my husband, now my ex-husband, would strongly disagree.

I left Neveh Shalom, kind of wishing I could grab my family's Yartzheit plaques off the walls and take them with me. I had more such conversations with every rabbi in town. Rabbi Joey understood the danger in performing a ritual on a child old enough to form lasting memories and agreed when I explained that, "I only want my children to associate positive experiences with Judaism." Rabbi Ariel also agreed that hat-a-fat-dam-brit was not essential to joining her synagogue and added, "Maybe when your son Noah is an adult, he will take his own spiritual journey and complete the process himself." That was a sweet thought when I considered that maybe someday it would become essential to him that he in fact become whole Jewish by his own choice.

Fast forward to the present and I have landed here at Havurah Shalom where my Jewishness, fractional or otherwise, isn't measured at the door. I am still fumbling over the conversion process since I don't know what I'm converting from. The terminology doesn't seem to fit my situation, being descended from a long line of Ukrainian Jews. So I just continue doing what I do, baking challah, lighting candles on Friday nights and singing songs in an effort to honor my heritage and teach my children. I do this because I am enchanted by the Hebrew, the melodies, and the ritual which punctuates an otherwise mundane week. And I do this because I am Jewish; one whole half of me.