

American Jewish Girl Finds 'Home' In Israel

My connection with Israel and to my own Judaism, I feel, is different than other Jews in the Diaspora and especially different from those in Israel.

I am from a part of the United States commonly referred to as "The Bible Belt." I grew up in a very small town in southwest Virginia, mostly famous for the amazing university, Virginia Tech, football and cows (agriculture). As I've come to learn, being Jewish and coming from a small town is an integral part of my story as it shaped—and continues to shape—my idea of Judaism, and even my connection to Israel.

Growing up, I never fully fit in. This wasn't because I was awkward, like all kids and teenagers are (which I was). Rather, it was because I grew up in a place where being Christian was as second nature in school as reciting the Pledge of Allegiance was every morning with the announcements. Until high school, I was told that I was "a devil who was going to hell for not believing in Jesus, people asking me where my horns were and why I killed Jesus."

My synagogue consisted of leftover parts of the Methodist church next door, and was conveniently located on Church Street. There weren't enough Jews for a real rabbi to come in (or, none ever wanted to come in), so we made do with what we had—a few ex-New York City Jews and Virginia Tech college students who came from more thriving communities than ours.

Only now have I come to realize that I am not the only one who has experienced this. I am one of many people who felt the need to hide their Jewish heritage and identity because of people who can't comprehend other people who aren't like them.

When I got old enough, I went to college and met my very first

Israeli after being coerced to attend a Hanukkah party at the local Hillel. I went expecting to find a lot of very dorky boys and a lot of “Jewish American Princessy” (JAPpy) girls, all talking about something I didn’t care much about. When I got there, I grabbed the first alcoholic beverage in sight and searched for the most normal looking person possible.

So I found her—Tamar. At first, I thought she was not Jewish and had been dragged to the party by a friend, as going places alone is never popular. We began talking and I found that this girl was normal, as out of place as I was, and had the weirdest accent ever because she was from Israel. This experience was my first Jewish one in college, and wasn’t my last. *Tamar was also my first experience of Israel.*

Until then my experience with Diaspora Jews was negative and limited. But after meeting Tamar, my interest was piqued and my interest in Judaism was rejuvenated. She told me as much as she could about Israel and I told her as much about what I knew of America as possible, albeit from my limited experiences.

Don’t get me wrong—my family has always supported Israel, but it was never on a personal level. Once I met this girl, this Israeli—it became more personal and I spent the rest of college promoting Israel and, to a lesser extent, Judaism on campus. It wasn’t until I came to Israel years later that my connection solidified.

Like a lot of American Jews, I came to Israel on Birthright (a program offering a free 10-day trip to Israel for any young member of the Jewish people who had never been to the country before) and expected to find, just like at that Hanukkah party years ago, a lot of awkward boys and “JAPpy” girls. But upon arriving at Ben Gurion airport, I was greeted by two new Tamars—with noses like mine (small and button shaped), who were smart, witty and beautiful. They welcomed me as if I was a long lost family member returning home, inviting me to stay

at their homes after the trip ended, no questions asked.

So now, when I'm asked why I stand with Israel, and why I chose to move here, I am surprised why anyone has to ask.

Israel is more than just some country in the Middle East that has more wars than I have fingers. Israel is more than just what we pray about in temple, Israel is more than just a funny accent.

To me, Israel is a place where I fit in, no questions asked; a place that is opening and welcome to all visitors.

It is a place that is awkward by juxtaposing new and old on the same plot of land. It is a place that is cool by being smart, and a place that still remembers that family is the most important thing in this world.

So, when really asked, I support Israel because it's home.

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