

“NOT JEWISH ENOUGH?”



BY SARAH RABIN SPIRA
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My sister and I used to rattle off all the things we are, like some kind of personal chant: “English, Scots-Irish, Ukrainian, Cherokee, Baptist, Southern, and Jewish.” But the truth was, we didn’t really feel like we belonged to any of these groups.

You see, it’s our dad who is Jewish, which meant that for many Jews in our hometown, we weren’t actually Jewish at all. We spent a lot of time feeling left out. We loved the holidays and spending time with our Bubbie and feeling connected to a culture and a religion with a long history. We loved that kind of Judaism, but it became exhausting being told, “You’re not REALLY Jewish.”

Fast forward more years than I’ll admit to, and I run PJ Library for all of Greater Washington and work for a Jewish Federation, with a Jewish husband who works at a synagogue, a son in a Jewish Day School and a daughter at a JCC preschool. So, what happened in the middle?

Lots of things.

- I inherited my grandparents’ dishes and table and decided to use them to host a Passover Seder with my most supportive friends. It has grown from six people to more than 25 friends, family, and kids.
- I started teaching preschool at a JCC and learned as much as I taught.
- My husband and I chose to confirm our children’s Judaism in the mikveh (ritual bath). They loved getting “dunky-dunkied” to “be more Jewish.”
- I did everything I could to make conscious choices about my beliefs and practice and to lead a meaningful Jewish life with my husband and children.
- Most important, I found a Jewish community that accepted my family as we are.

The angst is there, but it’s diminished over time. (What’s a Jew without a little angst?!) Every day as a PJ Library Professional, I get the chance to make Jewish life and our Jewish community more welcoming for all families. We want the Jewish connections to be meaningful, and the books are often just the first access point to our shared culture. Education tools are included with the books, so that parents (including me) can easily learn and teach their children while spending quality reading time together. More importantly, we want families to love being Jewish.

Each family finds their own path to Jewish life, so we provide a lot of options for families to make connections through the books and within the community. We host programs in grocery stores, bookstores, converted factories, playgrounds, ice cream stores, art studios, and more. We also have programs in synagogues, JCCs, day schools, our Federation building, and other Jewish spaces. Every engagement opportunity is designed to be high-quality, low-barrier, and welcoming to all families. If the books are the first access point, the programs are the second (and hopefully the third, fourth, fifth, and so on). I see it as my job to prevent the feelings that I had so long ago—feelings of being left out, of not knowing what is going on, of not being sure of my place. I do this by actively welcoming newcomers, explaining everything we are doing, translating and transliterating all Hebrew, and providing enriching experiences in delightful spaces.

And my sister? She read PJ Library books to her daughter until she was old enough to read them for herself. My niece’s connection to Judaism was created by the PJ Library books—she takes them as part of her heritage, without guilt or judgment, just joy. And that’s the experience I want to replicate for PJ Library families.

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