

I Used to Call Myself an Atheist

I used to call myself an atheist because I had no other word for it. I found it easier to say that I didn't believe in God than to patiently explain that I didn't believe in Jesus: to Christians, agnosticism is normal, but suddenly not believing in Jesus is heresy.

But at the same time, I knew in my heart that there is something greater than us that gives life meaning. There is a part of the divine in all of us that enables us to transcend pain and anger and suffering to be human and loving to one another. In that sense, I have always believed in God.

And so I have found real joy in discovering Judaism, because it has enabled me to join a community and share in this expression of faith. I have learned that in many ways Jewish ritual is structured around bringing meaning to everyday life: to see your doorposts and think of God.

The hard part, however, has been to integrate Judaism into my life without a family tradition to support me. I want to maintain my old ties, to keep a sense of who I was before this point, while at the same time adding to the richness of Jewish tradition and observance into my life. I am also impatient, in that I somehow keep expecting that this will happen all at once, immediately. It's not unlike expecting to reap a harvest from tiny seedlings.

The truth of the matter is that this process of becoming Jewish is not something that can be rushed. It takes time to work through the issues, to feel comfortable in this new role, to lose the self-consciousness and gain confidence. After all, it took me four years ago to go from 'maybe I will convert' to 'yes, I think I will convert.' The ceremony of our conversion took place about two years after that point.

There have been many times in this process when I have despaired, when I have told myself, 'this will never work.' But what I have been attempting is an identity shift, a new way of looking at myself; and it is in overcoming these moments of self-doubt that the greatest personal growth comes. I have definitely learned something along the way.

So I have found that the best answer to this kind of despair is to continue to celebrate Sabbath after Sabbath, holiday after holiday, building family traditions and rituals. This kind of ongoing observance is in fact the essence of faith: it is the belief that over time, these small acts will yield a bountiful harvest.

By Kari Fields