

What Shabbat Means to Me

By Brian Smollett

For most converts to whom I have spoken, and indeed, for myself, there was some type of experience that let us know that “this was it.” We were Jewish--spiritually, we had come home.

For me, this experience was my first Shabbat service. I still remember the date, December 14th 1998. I had never been to a Shabbat service before, and as I watched the sun set that evening, I remember feeling both a sense of hope and anticipation for the service I was going to attend that night. Anticipation, because it was my first time at a synagogue service and hope, because I so much hoped I would find what I had been searching for.

As I took my seat in the sanctuary and the service began, everything seemed to fall into place; the glowing Shabbat candles seemed to make the room a little warmer, even if it was just my imagination. The informality and joy with which the service was conducted made me feel like I was a part of Shabbat even though I was not yet a Jew. Though I did not understand the language in which the prayers were expressed, I felt that they spoke to me. When the Cantor began to chant the part of the Amidah about the Avot v'Imahot, I felt as if in some strange way, I too was connected to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel.

Following the service, the Rabbi, who would later become my mentor and one of my best friends wished me a "Shabbat Shalom" and asked me to stay for the Oneg Shabbat. At the oneg, I realized two things. That Jews love cake, and that Shabbat is not just about prayer but about people. All of the people around me were running over to greet friends whom they had not seen all week and, for a while I felt lost amidst all the strange faces. But before long I was invited to sit down with a group of people who immediately made me feel at home. As I left the small Long Island congregation that December night, I realized that I need not search any longer. I had found my home in Judaism, and in Shabbat.

Now, two years later, though I may not always realize it, that Shabbat evening taught me some of life's most important values. In fact, to me, that is what Shabbat is, a sanctuary in time that embodies the most important values. By observing Shabbat, we leave behind the other six days of the week that focus on the pursuit of time and space, and we turn our focus to what is most important, our values, our family, our friends, and our God. Shabbat Shalom

Brian Smollett is 18 years old and is a freshman at Binghamton University, in Binghamton, NY. His “home congregation” is Temple Emanu-El in Lynbrook, NY.