

## "Why I Became Jewish"

I get a number of people who ask me why I became Jewish. I want to tell them that my ancestors were Jewish, but that would lead them to the wrong assumption.

If I told them this, they might think that my grandparents or great-grandparents were Russian Jewish peasants who once lived beyond the Pale, perhaps, like Reb Tevye in "The Fiddler on the Roof." Or, if they knew anything about Jewish history in the American South, they might think that I came from German Jewish merchants who moved here in the 19th century. But neither are true. My ancestors by blood were mostly Protestants from the British Isles and NW Europe who came to Appalachia in the 1700s and 1800s and became Baptists and Methodists. They were country people who lived off of subsistence farming and trades, like my great-grandfather who was a blacksmith.

Yet, if I did say that my ancestors were Jewish, it would be true in a religious sense. In one of the final steps of conversion to Judaism, you immerse yourself in a ritual bath, or "mikveh," and say prayers. A final blessing is recited for you by the witness of your immersion that includes the line "you will dwell in the land of your ancestors." This means Israel, the land of the Jewish people. The purpose of this blessing is to let you know that you have a Jewish past as well as a Jewish future, and that Jews from ages ago, such as Abraham and Sarah, are your ancestors.

But while I want to say, "Well...my ancestors were Jewish," I don't say that. I might be D'vorah Yael bat Avraham v' Sarah when called up to the bima to bless the Torah, but the meaning of that for me is tough to explain. Instead, I came up with a short tale inspired by Hasidic folklore as my answer:

God said to the Jewish people, "I love you in spite of yourself."  
And the Jewish people responded, "Ditto."  
And that is why I'm Jewish.

The relationship between the Jewish people and God, as I have experienced, is a real relationship. It is not something one-sided that you just have to take and be happy with; it is something you negotiate. Discovering this nine years ago, when I was just starting to get interested in Judaism, was what really drew me in. I had been to numerous Bible studies as a Christian and even led some, but going to a Torah study for the first time blew me away. Actually having a dialogue with the text, arguing about it, questioning it....questioning God, even; that was new territory for me.

My little tale may sound like one of those, "you had to be there" moments. Perhaps it is. The rabbinic sages said that people who convert to Judaism have Jewish souls that simply weren't born in Jewish bodies. These souls, as the story goes, witnessed God giving the Torah at Sinai; an identity-forging moment in Jewish religious history. And as Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, the Sinai revelation is something that happens every moment; it is truly a past, present, and future event. So maybe to get my story you not only had to be there, but you have to be there and you will have to be there. That is what it means to be Jewish.

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