

I don't remember much from that night. I remember several doctors urgently approaching me, hooking me up to heart monitors, putting an IV in me, starting an EKG, and taking my vitals. I remember one nurse comforting me while I sobbed, still in disbelief and unable to understand anything that was happening to me.

*Everything happens for a reason*, I convinced myself. Except, for days I could not figure out the reason why this was happening to me.

My name is Isabella, and I'm 16 years old. I live in a family of six; including my parents, younger brothers and sister. The first five years of my life I was raised as a reform Jew. I remember celebrating Christmas at my grandparents house on my mother's side, and playing dreidel with my father's side of the family. My mother was raised as a Catholic, however as a child she always struggled finding a connection with it. After she met my father, she immediately connected with Judaism and decided that's how she wanted her children raised. Upon turning five, my parents decided to make it official and go forth with a conservative conversion. I remember dunking my head under the water with my brother and expecting to reach the surface feeling like the Jew I officially was now. Nothing.

My elementary school years were continued as a reform Jew, sporadically attending Shul for music services, and celebrating Hanukkah with my family, as at this point we were no longer celebrating Christmas with my extended family. Elementary school was the hardest five years I had yet to face. I was both verbally

and physically bullied by my peers because of my vulnerability and timid demeanor. By sixth grade I was emotionally exhausted and ready to switch schools, and soon enough my parents made the executive decision to switch my siblings and I to Hillel Day School, hoping to make Judaism a more prominent part of our lives. By the middle of sixth grade I was already keeping kosher and observing Shabbat every week. By eighth grade my family had joined a Chabad Orthodox Shul, and my mom went forward with an orthodox conversion to accommodate our newly religious family's needs. Dealing with such drastic and sudden changes was far from easy. I wasn't ready to watch my mom wear a *shetel*, or to wear skirts and long sleeves versus her classic go-to look of cargo capris and v-necks. I wasn't ready to observe Shabbat to the fullest or to not be able to go places on Saturdays. I simply wasn't ready. From then on I rejected Judaism. I didn't pay attention in religious classes, refused to pray during minyan, and would purposefully disregard the rules of Shabbat regardless of my family's beliefs. I spent years fighting the idea of Judaism. It took me over three years to fully comprehend and appreciate the gift I was given of being a Jew.

It was on day six of being in the hospital. By now I was admitted into pediatrics awaiting further evaluation. I was cleared of potential life threats and was awaiting transport to another test. Each day felt longer than the next, filled with my mom feeding me like a newborn because I was too depressed to eat, and

coloring books upon coloring books to accommodate my wandering mind. Soon enough Shabbos was coming around the corner, and my mom was making arrangements to get Shabbos candles to light in the hospital. As she plugged in the candles and began lighting them, she paused. Traditionally, at home my mom would be the only one lighting and praying, so I was confused at her sudden hesitation to carry on with her normal routine. She looked at me, the fake electric flames reflecting off of her eyes. She asked me to sing the blessing. My mom joined me on my bed and I reluctantly agreed to sing the blessing. I hesitantly opened my mouth from its natural part and felt as the first note and syllable effortlessly flowed off my tongue. I heard the echoing of my voice and the melody carry through out the room like a cool breeze from a cracked window. I felt a sense of familiarity and comfort as I began to sing, "*Baruch atah Hashem eloqueinu melech haolam...*". As I continued the blessing the electric flame magnified throughout the room, illuminating the needles and IV bags surrounding us. "*...L'chadlik ner shel Shabbat,*" my mother was now in tears holding me tight. I suddenly flashed back to my conversion when I was 5, when I was innocently hoping for that overwhelming feeling of being a true Jew to consume me- and it hit me. That feeling was happening to me, now 11 years later, hand in hand with my mother in a hospital room, praying, right then and there. I can't explain what I felt other than complete validation of my Jewish identity and God's presence among

us. It was truly the most beautifully breath taking moment of my life thus far. As I stared deeply into that electric Shabbos candle, watching its light reflect off of the tears on my mother's eyes and its flame flicker throughout the room, the light symbolized a beacon of hope for me. Although my past week had been unimaginably difficult, and it felt as if day after day I was sitting in the dark- as I stared into that candle and its radiant light illuminating the desolately lit room, I knew brighter days were ahead. As I embraced my mother and placed my chin upon her shoulder, I saw my nurse in tears. It was evident to the entire room that at that very moment, God's presence was felt.

As transport came to take me to my test, I watched as the candlelight slowly flickered as my stretcher rolled past. I observed the light of the electric flame, and for the first time ever, the path I was to take was illuminated as if it were God Himself leading the way. Without hesitation I followed my destined path, and as I looked back I saw the Shabbos candle slowly flickering as the last of my stretcher exited the door.