Barely a Jew

I will admit that religion is not a gargantuan aspect of my life, nor is it one of my utmost priorities. I even question those who put religion ahead of all else, because to me there are so many more important concerns. Yes, I am most certainly Jewish, and if anyone ever asks me the religion in which I classify as, then Judaism is the first thought that pops into my brain. And yes, I spend every Sunday down at my local Synagogue helping seventh graders prepare for their bar/bat mitzvahs in addition to aiding the weekly runnings of a typical religious school. However, I also do not keep kosher, and my Saturday mornings rarely consist of Torah readings or prayer. I also do not think twice before flipping on the television on a Friday night or taking a cruise in my Ford Escape on a Shabbat afternoon. So while it was surprising when a friend at school labeled me as “barely Jewish”, it didn’t come across to me as shocking once I gave it some further thought. However, it still made me sit down and ponder what it really meant to be Jewish. Must I truly believe in everything written down in the scrolls of the Torah? Must I attend Synagogue each and every Saturday morning for the rest of eternity? Must I give up pepperoni pizza and bacon forever?

I always knew that I didn’t follow all of the rules of Judaism. I’ve eaten cheeseburgers since elementary school and have broken the rules of the Sabbath since before I can remember. But I never comprehended that this would harm my classification as a Jew. I mean, there are so few Jewish students at my school that I guess it never mattered. Even the fact that I proclaimed myself as Jewish was enough to be known as such, no matter if I really abided by all of the guidelines. Nevertheless, I couldn’t stop thinking about what my friend had said to me. Was I really “barely Jewish?” Should I start regarding my religious restrictions more seriously? However, as I stated before, religion has never been the number one aspect of my existence, so I eventually just moved on. But for some reason, my friend’s words stuck in the back of my mind like a candle melted upon a menorah.

After what my friend had told me, I wanted to find some way that I can still be a part of the Jewish community without always following all of the rules or putting it as a first concern. Yeah, I was already volunteering at my Synagogue on a weekly basis, but I needed something more than just a tutoring gig. Additionally, that job would stop once my days in high school ended, so I needed something that could stick with me for the rest of my life. Is it simply enough to have a bar/bat mitzvah for my future children? For many, that seems to be case. It has never been more common for families to disregard any form of Judaism altogether until their kids hit the ages of 11 or 12. It is then that these parents find a tutor who can magically teach a teenager to read an entirely new language within the span of a few months, somehow get through an aliyah themselves, and throw a masterful party that officially makes their child a Jew forever. But is it that easy? Can one really just stop there? Is that what my friend meant as “barely Jewish?” Because if that is what he was hinting at, I sincerely hope that I am not beginning to fall under that unfortunate class.

From this, I have thought about the many ways in which I can continue being a Jew. My family and I will be flying to Israel next November, a trip that will cost me three days of school and a chance to see Michigan host Ohio State live. But this vacation is more important than a section of math or a college football matchup. This vacation will be about life, and how I can add another chapter into a book that is already filled to the max with academics, college, sports, and more. This flight also doesn’t have to be the last one that I take out to Israel, the largest Jewish community there is. This journey could be the tradition that keeps me engaged in a Jewish lifestyle for years to come.

I know that I will never be a model of the Jewish religion. I will never be able to fully keep kosher, nor will I be able to attend services on a weekly basis. However, I do wish to be Jewish, and not “barely” one for that matter. I wish to be just as much of a Jew as my parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles have been. I wish to live a Jewish life that I can pass on to the next generation someday, and inspire them to go through the same process that I am maneuvering through right now. Because when all's said and done, even if religion wasn’t always the most important feature to me, I want to know that I did the best that I could to be a part of the Jewish community as a whole. And I want to make that community proud.