



Berkeley Hillel Prize Entrants
Spring 2019

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote in *God in Search of Man*,
“Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion—its message becomes meaningless.”

Rabbi Heschel speaks to the struggle of finding a way to connect to religion in our lives today.

The prompt:
Describe your Jewish Quest.

Entry by: Gilad Barach

These days, I sit in classrooms hearing lectures about Jewish Muslim relationships throughout history. With peers, I discuss Jewish identity and its complexities. In University courses I learn about Heschel, Maimonides, Isaac Leib Peretz, and Dahlia Ravikovitch from inspiring professors. In the afternoons, I may quickly read about the Jews of Morocco and their venerated Saint Soheila in order to rush downtown for a guest lecture at the Magnes. All this obsession, around Jewish history, philosophy and life, a few years ago would have seemed crazy to me. I should clarify that my present absorption in Jewish conversations and circles is not representative of the majority of my life, where I felt Jewish only on high holidays.

Inspired by the colorful atmosphere of Berkeley, a magnificent pageant of cultures and identities, I found myself intrigued and proud of my Jewishness for the first time. Curiously, it was not during my gap year in Israel after high school, rather only at Berkeley that I began to allow myself to open up to Judaism. After my first months in Berkeley, I became aware of a subconscious shame I was harboring for so long. I was embarrassed to claim my Jewishness. Judaism seemed like a rigid collection of stories and rules that one had to memorize and follow. However, through book clubs with Rabbi Adam, conversations in academic courses, guest lectures, Hillel learning events, and educational programs in Israel, I have opened up to the richness and wisdom of my cultural heritage.

Now, Judaism is no longer rigid for me; instead, it is contradicting and flexible. As Heschel writes, “Jewish thinking and living can only be adequately understood in terms of a dialectic pattern, containing opposite or contrasted properties.” Judaism can never be strictly one thing, or confined to one place. Likewise, I began to find myself engaging with my Judaism in all spheres of my life. In my Critical Theory course on Benjamin, Adorno, and Habermas, I couldn’t help but see the intersection of their theories with crucial Jewish questions. In my Law and Development course, class discussions of ownership, justice, and law inevitably weighed into other conversations revolving Israel, Halacha, and Jewish autonomy.

Perhaps the discrepancy in my Jewish upbringing, raised in a secular Jewish home while attending an orthodox Jewish community, made me feel out of place and embarrassed. My time in Israel and Berkeley post high school introduced me to various Jewish communities exploring and experiencing their faith in different ways. First, in my academic course on Jewish Love and Intimacy, and later, during a transformative summer at Pardes Institute as the Marla Bennett fellow, I began to open up to Jewish textual study and recognize the wisdom in these religious discussions, learning and laughing as I read the conversations of eccentric, genius rabbis. Discovering the Berkeley nigun collective, a magical group of young Jews who meet to sing nigunim and share Torah learning relevant to current events, led me to new experiences of Jewish community I never imagined existed.

The most challenging and rewarding exploration of my Judaism beyond my academic learning occurs weekly, on Thursday afternoons, when I find myself standing in front of a class of second graders, my second graders! For the past three years, I have been a teacher at Congregation Beth El, initially a Hebrew teacher to fifth graders, and most recently, a Judaica teacher to second graders. I struggle to keep the attention of thirteen pairs of eyes as I use a lilting voice and theatrical gestures in order to make Tu B’shvat relevant to their eight year old

lives. I give all my energy and intention to keep thirteen pairs of frantic little hands still for several minutes as I try to slip in an explanation about this celebratory New Years of the trees. I am forced to ask myself- how is this holiday really relevant to eight year old Shalev, who really just wants to draw and go outside? Or how will seven year old, quiet Django, with his small stuffed animal dragon in hand, care about Rabbi Baruch Shalom HaLevi Ashlag's metaphorical explanation of the holiday? How can my students even hear the incredibly long name of this Rabbi and not feel overwhelmed?

Rabbi Ashlag says that "The seed we plant in the soil symbolizes the great potential that dwells in our connections." While Ashlag's words are inspiring to me, the truth is, its okay if Django and Shalev, and the other children, would rather play gaga outside. Part of my Jewish quest as an educator is learning that it's okay if children don't understand the tradition in the same way that I've come to. I recognize that they are experiencing a different, equally crucial aspect of Judaism- community. I am learning to recognize the value of my role as a community coordinator to my second graders, encouraging them to like and respect each other as humans as well as connect over the fact that they share customs like Shabbat and Passover. For my maddening, lovely second graders, my most important goal is to build a micro community for them, with the hope that their Judaism feels like an identity that brings them together, rather than misplaced, as it did for me for so many years.

I will always be grateful for Berkeley for transforming my subconscious discomfort of Judaism into a powerful aspect of my identity. Here, I have the honor of studying Comparative Literature, Near Eastern Studies and Jewish Studies on a campus with impressive, caring staff who support my intersectional exploration of language, religion and culture. Thanks to Hillel, I have been fortunate to expand my studies, experientially learning on multiple programs in Israel. This confusing Jewish quest is beautiful and strenuous and endless, and I am so thankful for the many wonderful people: staff at Berkeley Hillel and UC Berkeley departments, and friends I've met in the Jewish community, who support me as I grapple with texts and discover new possibilities on this journey.

Entry by: Nava Bearson

For as long as I can remember I have loved to sing. A word triggers a song that pops into my head and I will be singing nonstop for the rest of the day. Growing up, my favorite part of going to synagogue each week with my family was the singing. I got goosebumps on my arms when the congregation sang out together. During services I would harmonize – adding new notes to enhance the sound of the collective. I spent Shabbat afternoons singing songs from musicals with my best friends.

But music-filled Shabbatot became the exception rather than the rule as I got older. School, friends, and technology got in the way. When I got to college, I was eager to incorporate singing back into my life. I auditioned for an a cappella group, but quickly came to recognize that it was not what I was looking for. I realized I wasn't just craving music, I was craving *Jewish* music. I was drawn to Kabbalat Shabbat services at Hillel and began attending as frequently as I could. After a stressful week, I wanted to relax and engage my mind in a completely different way. Attending Kabbalat Shabbat, a service I had little exposure to growing up, allowed me to focus my whole attention on reading the Hebrew words and learning the intricacies of new melodies. Once I was comfortable with the prayers, I felt empowered to experiment with harmony, an activity that challenges me to listen closely and use my intuition to choose a pattern of notes that complements the voices around me.

The summer after my freshman year, I went on Birthright and afterwards spent six weeks volunteering at a hostel in Jerusalem. To my surprise, the hostel was full of devout Christians, some of whom had never had a conversation with a Jew before coming to Israel. And they were eager to discuss religion! They had many questions about Jewish traditions and culture and wanted to compare our different faiths. I relished in the opportunity to answer questions about Judaism and consider why my Jewish identity is meaningful to me.

In Jerusalem I was not only challenged to explain my Judaism to others, I also found new means of expression. I was introduced to a synagogue I fell in love with. The prayer leaders sang out powerfully and the many different voices of the congregants added richness and texture. When we sang together I at long last felt those goosebumps again! Even though I was by myself in a city far away from my community, I felt at home. For the entire hour-long walk back to my hostel I couldn't stop singing the melodies.

Leaving Israel I made a commitment to myself that I would lead services. But alas, life got in the way. I took difficult classes and spent the rest of my time working and participating in extracurriculars. On top of that I managed to break my foot, tripping on uneven sidewalk! Despite the fact that crutching up the hill left me exhausted, I still looked forward to going to Shabbat services to get a break from the busy school week and have time to focus on beautiful melodies and my own thoughts.

When a family friend asked me to read Torah at her daughter's bat mitzvah during my Sophomore year it provided the chance to get back on track with my goal. Practicing my Hebrew and learning the trope reminded me of how much I enjoy reading Torah. It provided me an opportunity to connect with my dad as he listened to my reading and corrected my pronunciation. He told me about how before he reads Torah he takes a moment to ground himself by visualizing his grandfather. For me, like my dad, reading Torah makes me feel

connected to the people in my family and the wider Jewish community who have read the exact same words with similar melodies for generations.

Next I decided to focus on learning how to lead Kabbalat Shabbat. I attended different services and paid close attention to the choices the leader was making. I practiced the melodies I could remember on my own and recorded myself singing new melodies so I wouldn't forget them. On a recent Friday night after Shabbat dinner, I sat down with my dad and practiced the whole service. As the person who has contributed most to my Jewish learning throughout my life, it was meaningful for me to be able to teach my dad the new melodies I had learned.

I find comfort in the familiarity of Jewish music. It also provides a unique opportunity to push myself to explore my spirituality. Sitting around a circle on the floor of Hillel, Lauren taught a small group of students a *nigun* that we repeated over and over again. We had complete freedom to alter the tempo, add percussion, and play around with harmonies. She emphasized that we would sing until it felt natural to pause and then dwell in the silence. Singing in this context was cathartic and meditative – I left the service feeling as though we had created something larger than the sum of our individual voices.

Entry by: Anonymous

Directions for Tying Tzitzit: The Jewish Quest of a Woman Still Wondering

I came into this world on a rainy Shabbat evening with a piercing cry to announce my early arrival. My parents, who never made it to services that night, greeted me by wrapping me in a tallit— almost as if they anticipated the spirituality that would pulse through my veins and simmer at my fingertips. I can still feel the thick wool of that tallit and hear the clinking of the glass beads woven into its tzitzit. Judaism has been in me from the moment I took my very first breath.

Double Knot. Wrap 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7.

Six months later, my father became a pulpit rabbi, and I became the daughter of a congregation. I was raised on itchy sanctuary chairs, the strong sound of Torah chants, and the sweet taste of oneg lemon bars. I felt the heavy weight of history within the walls of the synagogue and came to understand the complex beauty in the randomness of davening. Come High Holy Days, my father would hold me and wrap us both in his tallit, perfectly traversing his wingspan. The safety I felt while enveloped in the heavy, colorful shawl was unlike any I've ever known. This sense of security blossomed into a deep dedication to the Jewish tradition.

Double Knot. Wrap 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8.

Every year, come June, I packed my bags and headed to the beautiful rolling hills of Jewish summer camp. At camp, I felt the strange, unknowable energy that lived in every breath of clean mountain air and in every branch of the beloved redwood trees. It was present in the laughter of my camp-family and in every note of our collective song. I remember my first Shabbat there, everyone dressed in white. As we sang the Hashkiveinu, asking for God's shelter of peace, our counselors spread tie-dye tallitot over our heads and blessed us. As I looked up and saw the canopy of prayer shawls above me, I recognized this evasive and mystical energy that, until this moment, had always lived beyond the limits of my understanding. As tzitzit rained down and tickled my bare shoulders, I felt God.

Double Knot. Wrap 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11.

Come middle school, I began to realize that it was atypical for a girl my age to be so fascinated by faith. We were twelve years old when Isabella Rothenberg turned to me during religious school and told me that the way I loudly sang the prayers, the way I rocked my body back and forth, and held the siddur tightly to my forehead was 'weird.' To her, my passion was embarrassingly conspicuous. I tried to remind myself that she knew not the thrill of watching her father give a Shabbat morning sermon, or of hiking to the tallest peak before sunrise at summer camp. Still, she quieted me. But two months after Isabella's comment stung me, I stood on the bimah and proudly became a bat mitzvah. My parents presented me with my tallit, and I accepted a lifelong responsibility. The weight on my shoulders, lended by the beautiful mix of blue threads and white tassels, grounded me. I was no longer quiet. I chanted the song of the sea and journeyed toward Jewish adulthood.

Double Knot. Wrap 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13.

Four years later, I touched down in Israel. Every bustling corner, every unique street sign, every piece of smooth Jerusalem stone spoke to me. History was my map and the land became my teacher. For months, I traversed the paths of my ancestors and followed their stories. I fell in love. I followed the Jewish journey all the way to Poland, an epicenter of pain and hardship during the Shoah. The sharp cold penetrated my layers as I walked on still train tracks toward a nightmare I had only seen in pictures. Auschwitz was blindingly black and white. I felt a weakness, a vulnerability, like a cultural siren inside me, and I did not know how I would will myself to walk through the looming threshold. I ached to return to Israel. Suddenly, a strange impulse, a kind of muscle memory, moved my hand to my backpack. I pulled out my tallit and placed it over my shoulders. I dug my feet into the harsh ground and felt something take root deep within me. I held tightly to the smooth silk corners and their tzitzit. I was protected.

Double Knot. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

I grew older, entered college, and learned things about the world I had never known. My faith ebbed and flowed like the tide. I found myself in the process of adjusting and readjusting to find the version of Judaism and the sense of God that had been a constant in my life. Until, I stopped... I stopped when I felt that a 'nice Jewish boy' could do that unspeakable thing that makes a confused Jewish girl weep "Me Too" into Genesis 34. Just like that, I was lost. Prayer felt angry, community was frightening, and faith— impossible. I was empty. It wasn't until almost a year later, as I packed up the room of my childhood, that I noticed something on an untouched shelf. I dusted off the dark blue box and regained a bit of breath. I pulled out my tallit, faded and worn, and with it came all of the certainties of my Jewish quest. I slowly kissed where my shaking fingers held the forgotten fabric...once, then twice. I swung it over my shoulders, wrapping myself in its warmth. I fell to the ground, completely enveloped, and wondered: "when will it all come back to me?"

Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech Ha-Olam Asher Kideshanu B'mitzvotav V'tzivanu L'hitateif Be-Tzitzit.

Entry by: Kayla Cohen

The Spaces in My Togetherness

Last year, my friends and I invited one of our visiting lecturers, a Tibetan Buddhist monk, to a Tu B'Shvat seder in the Charedi-turned-hippie neighborhood of Nachlaot.

The event's Facebook page asked guests to bring wine for the four prayers. We had stopped at Mahane Yehuda on the way, curving through the shuk's wet alleyways, passing its porous walls and the fruit stands closed for the night, weaving in and out of a few liquor stores to find a 20-shekel bottle of red wine. People's heads turned as Geshe Damchoe trailed behind us in his long crimson robe.

The seder was in a small synagogue. The room was filled twice over capacity. A buzzing murmur hovered across the room. Talk drowned the rabbi's voice. No one was listening. Everyone -- but us five -- was drunk. Heavily drunk. And everyone -- but Geshe Damchoe -- was Jewish.

Damchoe sat quietly in his seat, reading the pamphlet explaining the different mixtures of wine that only he abstained from drinking that night. Then a niggun erupted. People drummed on the tables. They hollered and clapped. They beat their chests, climbed onto their chairs (or fell if they lost their balance). The five of us stared, rose, and followed.

Yin/yang is what Taoists see in the world: duality. Buddhists see karma governing an interdependent unity. In the little synagogue, amidst the roaring and table-banging, I laughed to myself: the Jews only know disorder.

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(You can't remember ever feeling that self-conscious about Jewish practice before. There was something about being in the company of a spectator, someone with limited exposure to Judaism (and no predisposition to defend it) that made celebrating the holiday fully and without questioning difficult for you. So you too adopted the role of observer. And for the first time, a fuller understanding of your own culture came not from engaging with it, but distancing yourself from it.

*You were self-conscious, but not necessarily conscious of yourself.
You were conscious of an "other."*

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That night blurred the defined space between "other" and "self." It forced me to consider how much other people have affected how I see my self.

I hold others' habits, tastes, and opinions. I hold behaviors that were modeled for me (*your bad habit of cracking your neck, which started only because you thought your desk partner in 8th grade looked cool when she popped the capsules of her joints in cascading sequence*). I hold feelings that I learned (*your fear of plastic bottles from the progressive people you met in college, or revulsion from the thought of once mixing meat with milk -- embodied most gloriously in BBQ-chicken-cheese pizza -- before you*

lived in Israel and decided to keep kosher). I hold ideas that I did not create (*like what your legs or chest should look like*). I hold expressions that I can't explain (*the spontaneous tears induced by a friend's; the contagious yawn induced by your neighbor*).

I am not the only one engaged in this interexchange. Judaism has interacted with other peoples (and absorbed some of their cultural practices) for over two millennia. Jews were conquered by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks and Romans; by the Christians, Ottomans and British; before they were exiled, they lived in Egypt, Spain, Portugal, France, and Yemen; they founded communities across eastern and central Europe; in ancient Persia and modern Iran; in Iraq and Syria; in Albania, Morocco, South Africa, Mexico, Argentina; Ethiopia, Canada, the U.S., China, and India.

Because of their diasporic history, Jews also stand as a collection of different peoples, and their cultures, tastes, and practices. Some Jews are blonde. Some Jews have black skin. Jews hold citizenship to different countries. They speak different languages. Communities in the *mizrach* sing their prayers to Muslim chants. Many western synagogues adopted pews from churches. The ancient Beit Alpha synagogue by the Galilee holds pagan gods on its mosaic floors.

Judaism is imbued with so much otherness.
(*You, too, are imbued with so much otherness.*)

From where, then, does the Jewish people's sense of self arise?
(*From where, then, does your sense of self arise?*)

Navigating the fluid interexchange between rigid conceptions of "self" and "other" is daunting. At the same time, the strain that this challenge has placed on how I interact with the world, and the fragmented feelings it has left me with, best honor my experience as a Jew, and on a more basic level, as a person.

Nearly a year after the Tu B'Shvat seder in Nachlaot, one of my teachers introduced me to a book called *The Prophet* by Khalil Gibran. He quoted a line from the book: "Let there be spaces in your togetherness." (*The idea cleaves to the walls of your brain.*) In context, the point of the quote was to remind people engaged in any relationship with another person of their own individuality. To separate the self from an other, and sanctify the self-contained.

But maybe Gibran's words can also be interpreted to question the self-sufficiency of the individual altogether. Maybe seeing spaces in one's togetherness is the recognition of voids in a whole bigger than its acting parts; separation in what appears singular; other influences in the self; a network of people in one's personhood.

Judaism hollows spaces — spaces not just between Diaspora communities in different parts of the world, but within an individual's consciousness. These spaces are deeply embedded in my consciousness. I occupy different spaces: the space my body takes, the space between my body and another's; and the emotional space that bleeds into another's and sometimes encompasses the two. I jump between my selfhood and my otherness, "I" and (*you*). I occupy the space to both write about and to myself, to be and ultimately, to ask: "*who are you, Kayla? How do you assert yourself? How do you assert your self?*"

Entry by: Anonymous

The smell of old, dusty paper. The shuffling of feet, skirts swishing as legs bow. Maybe a cough or two, quickly stifled. Bright light, coming down from stained-glass windows. Words I don't understand, sung in a tune I know better than my favorite songs. These are the associations I have to ritual Judaism, to be being in my synagogue. These are the feelings I've retained from sitting quietly while I absorbed everything I could as a quiet seven year old in a room of mostly seventy year olds. Tapping my toes, making games up in my head, even bringing a book to read—I did anything to avoid the dullness of sitting in the sanctuary.

To put it bluntly, I was bored. And yet, I had a sense of duty that kept me sitting quietly in my seat, next to my parents—after all, I am Jewish, and Jews go to synagogue. That's practically what Judaism is all about! At least that's the way I rationalized being stuck in shul as an elementary schooler. Being Jewish hasn't always been something I was particularly present in. I identified as being Jewish, and certainly felt Jewish, considering the number of Saturday mornings I spent at synagogue, the kosher kitchen at my home, and my years in Hebrew school. Except even at a time when I was probably the most actively Jewish, I probably appreciated it the least. Sitting quietly during services was torture, and I remember agonizing over whether my parents would make me stay after lunch to do Birkat Hamazon.

Eventually, I grew past the stage of dragging my feet everytime I had to go to synagogue, and I came to appreciate Judaism in a new way. Even though in high school I didn't go to synagogue on Saturday morning as frequently as I did when I was younger, I felt more aligned with Jewish values as I grew to learn more and more. I found myself choosing to be Jewish, to participate in holidays, services, and activities because I wanted to, not just because my parents were making me. I found a real place of spirituality in the Jewish idea of tikkun olam, which I really took to embody my passion for environmentalism and sustainability. The value the Jewish community puts on love, kindness, and giving to others really spoke to me, and I got increasingly involved in Judaism and community service work throughout high school.

Here in college, I've found it hard to keep up the level of Jewish community I had back at home. Even though I found a great community at Hillel, I found myself feeling somewhat lost Jewishly without my familiar Saturday morning services. In a way, I had been using prayer and my experience at synagogue as a crutch. No matter where I was, I could fall back on my Jewish knowledge to prove that I was Jewish, that I was proud of being Jewish, and that I was connected to Judaism. Now that I'd lost my rhythm, I found that I needed something to make myself feel Jewish that wasn't just prayer or eating meals provided by Hillel. What I discovered was a new way to connect to Judaism that wasn't just prayer—it was discussion. When I joined a fellowship at Hillel, I found myself feeling more Jewishly fulfilled. My feelings of guilt at not being more active were slowly sliding away, and my appreciation of the Jewish community here at Berkeley was growing. I realized that I really just needed a space to be Jewish—to talk about the values I held close, and to be with Jewish people, not just physically but intellectually and emotionally.

When I was a kid, I just wanted to get through services and eat a couple bagels. Now I want something more, I want a connection with something spiritual. I want to meet people like me. I want to find a place to expand my values, environmentalism, kindness for others, tzedakah. I

want to have a place to honor my history, and the Jewish history. Judaism cannot be just tradition for me, it can't be just discipline or habit. My journey, my quest, is to find my compassion in Judaism, to find comfort, family. I want to keep learning and growing, but more than anything I want to find that space where I feel open to express my Jewish values and be Jewish in a way that I define, and not in a way that is defined for me. I still love going to services. A big part of Judaism for me really is nostalgia, and the comfort of doing something that I grew up doing. There is so much beauty in the idea that I could walk into a synagogue anywhere in the world, and recognize the words they're saying and the prayers their chanting. And now, when I go to synagogue I'm not being dragged in by my mom and dad. I'm appreciating the Jewish community I've found, and celebrating my Judaism in my own way that I feel comfortable with, not just a tradition or feeling of duty.

And yet, my quest ever continues. I know that as I come to different stages of my life, my need for Judaism will alter and flow, and I'm excited to see where Jewish life takes me. And even though I know that I've come to appreciate different aspects of Judaism more recently it's meaningful for me to remember how my Jewish quest started in synagogue, and how I've still got a long way to go.

Entry by: Brooke Elconin

The Quest of A Jewish Knight

In Judaism the sunset is a symbol that acts as a time reference guide. The fast begins at sundown and ends a day later at sundown. Shabbat dinner begins at sundown and the day of rest concludes during the successive sundown. The brightest colors are on display during sunset calling the people on this Earth to stop and look up and out at the natural display of creation.

According to the Oxford Online Dictionary a quest when used as a noun is “a long or arduous search for something”. In a medieval roman context it’s “an expedition made by a knight to accomplish a prescribed task”. Although I cannot consider myself a knight by any means, I do believe that when an individual is on their right path they become a knight of sorts. Empowered, motivated, excited, and strong in their own “expedition”. An ideal quest for this Jewish knight is the search for a perfect sunset.

It could be the ending of a wonderful day, a cherry on top of a well spent afternoon with family and friends. A day filled with happiness and connection that is perfectly tied up with an ending that takes your breath away. In Israel this past summer, I experienced this day. My friends and I all woke up in our Tel Aviv apartment to the sound of our friends down the hall blasting Omer Adam. One can only smile at this type of wake up call. We utilized the Israeli bus system to meet up with our program for a beach day and bonfire in Herzliya. Hiking up to the meeting spot where our madrich had brought blankets and food to prepare the Poyke. Our group of 20 NorCal college students gathered wood, built a fire, prepared the vegetables, and bonded on top of the bluffs overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. That sunset was golden, warm, and perfectly encapsulated a perfect summer day spent in Israel.

The perfect sunset could also be the one good part of your day, a way to escape. A stressful week can be turned around by one peaceful, calm sunset viewed at the perfect time to transcend the woes of your life. Stress is an interesting phenomenon. It could be temporary or long term. It could be inflicted by a situation or a person, and the effects are gruesome. It’s frightening to read studies about the stress hormone cortisol. This powerful hormone inflicts harm on our metabolism, insulin levels, heart rate, and decreases quality of life. Perhaps a good sunset could rid the body of that damage induced cortisol? During an especially tense day last year I was facing the two hardest exams of the semester on the same day. Studying for Physics and Organic Chemistry was making me irritable, sad, and insecure. I wasn’t sure how to navigate these feelings of helplessness and stress. The Berkeley Lawrence Hall of Science is located at the top of the Berkeley hills with an incredible view of the Bay. A quick decision to run to the Hall of Science was all I needed to take a break and reaffirm that everything was going to be okay, hard academic course load and all. This Jewish knight used the sunset to combat the stress of this rigorous university. It was perfect at the time because it allowed me to remember that a sunset can be whatever you need most in that moment.

A caveat to this perfect sunset search is that at different stages of one’s life, the perfect sunset means different things. As a child growing up in the very Jewish San Fernando Valley, sunsets meant family time. Dad would come home from work, my older brother Garrett and I could play soccer together in the backyard, and my mom would gather us at dinner to discuss our

days. It is a simple love that I reflect back on with a warm heart. For almost 15 years sunsets remained joyous for my family. However, health scares began to dominate our home. Sunsets started becoming a little less joyful when my Dad was diagnosed with colon cancer and a brain tumor. Dinners became discussion about chemotherapy, surgery, and therapy. The darkness really engulfed the house during this arduous time. I can't recall any sunsets that I experienced during that year. It pains me to think that we missed all of those precious moments so focused on monitoring his deteriorating health. The evening of September 7th was the first sunset I experienced without my father. Pain, grief, sadness, and confusion flooded my thoughts as Garrett and I drove home from the hospice ward that day. As we drove in silence, the sky began to turn into the colors typifying the change from day to night. All I could think of was that Dad had been waiting to showcase his creative self with this new canvas. Not necessarily a perfect sunset for this Jewish knight, but a significant one that I reflect back to whenever I feel the sting of grief and miss his presence.

The sunset will be a different kind of perfect to each person that experiences it. As each day brings new experiences and challenges, a sunset is a perfect reminder of the days that have preceded and for the ones that lie ahead. My quest continues as I look for the days that need a moment of clarity, of reflection, and for the days that I yearn to stay still in a beautiful array of color spread out over the sky in our forever moving world.

Entry by: Evan Frenklak

It was junior year of college — probably one of those pleasant football season, leaves falling, homework accumulating type of autumn weeks — and I realized with some horror that Rosh Hashanah would conflict with my midterm. Throughout college, I had managed to go home to Sacramento on a weekend for either Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, and I stayed in Berkeley for the other one. Now I was in Berkeley shortly before Rosh Hashanah with no plans to make up my test outside of the holiday. UC Berkeley's religious accommodation policy requires notifying your professor of a test conflict in the first few weeks of class. In the back of my mind, I agreed with the policy. If this is a midterm-skipping type of holiday for me, why was I unable to make the effort to check as soon as the semester began? I was reasonably sure Sandy Koufax began contemplating the World Series' overlap with Yom Kippur well ahead of the first pitch. That's what made it hard: it was a fair policy. The problem was myself, my independence, my indifference — not the secular world. So even though I had missed school for high holidays since grade school, and my family would expect that I do not go, and my people would expect that I do not go and I, Evan Frenklak, *would expect that I do not go*, I went to the midterm. It concerned stochastic processes. My performance was mediocre.

The central dilemmas of Jewish practice in America often reduce to tradeoffs between assimilation and isolation. The regular midterm with the rest of the class or a day of religious seclusion spent in services? Surely I could paint every religious decision as a choice between secular normalcy and Jewish consistency. Yet I'm living in a time and place of incredible religious tolerance, or even *religious accommodation*, a phrase my father could have hardly imagined at the age of twenty-one from the cold confines of the Soviet Union. There was an opportunity for me to provide sufficient advance notice and participate in my class in a relatively normal way. Most questions of religious practice in a free country have a variety of solutions; my crisis was the decision-making itself. I began to question the meaning of abstaining from work on the Jewish new year if I did so simply out of habit. My resignation to testing on Rosh Hashanah surrounded a single unresolved question: What if my continued religious practice was founded on past patterns rather than present engagement?

I've heard from both my rabbi and my engineering research mentors that the greatest challenge in discovering meaningful answers is uncovering the core questions. It is true that I value the sustenance of Judaism in the modern day after our religion has been suppressed in every era of history. To refrain from Judaism in twenty-first century America after it so precariously survived twentieth century Europe is unmistakably soul-wrenching. However, a Judaism of obligation would do little to sustain the soul of the religion. I found it increasingly difficult to interpret my religious practice as duty-based, especially because prayer and practice did hold meaning for me separate and apart from the past. Even as I searched for the core engineering questions during summer research projects in new parts of America, I found myself simultaneously searching for a nearby synagogue most every Shabbat. In unfamiliar territory and left to my own devices, my ideal Friday night still included a religious service. Somehow I consistently craved the reflection of prayer, the traditionalism of melody, and the familiarity of a Jewish community. I was continually interested in how Judaism looked in these new cities. A wry congregant unforgettably inquired about my "shul shopping" experience in town. I had to stop and ask myself why I was drawn to Jewish practice. Was it simply the result of inertia? That appealed to the engineer in me; changing direction requires force. Did I continuously

sustain my motivation to practice or was it simply a trajectory from my upbringing? Had Judaism become the stuff of habit?

Among Jewish American literature, Chaim Potok's novels have always stood out to me as developing stunningly relatable characters. This was odd to me, because his protagonists come from far more traditional Jewish backgrounds than I do. What I've come to realize is that the American religious struggle, faced by each of Potok's protagonists, transcends any specific practice. In my current Potok novel, Gershon Loran struggles to understand atomic weapons in the context of his kabbalistic knowledge from rabbinical school while serving as a chaplain in post-war Korea. In another, Asher Lev struggles to communicate Jewish ideas about his Hasidic background in the world of professional art. Potok's protagonists struggle, and they struggle with a non-Jewish world that provides no easy answers to the practical expression of Judaism. That's what makes his characters so Jewish to me. A religion of habit does not require the continual search to reconcile religious practice with the modern world. In a Judaism of intention, every moment requires drawing upon personally intense or thought-provoking features of religious tradition, building an authentic practice out of the most striking elements of the foundations of Judaism. It is a continual research project in which asking the central questions is the greatest responsibility.

A Jewish folk story tells that every baby begins life with complete knowledge of the Torah, but quickly an angel touches the baby above the lip, everything is forgotten, and there begins a lifelong process of re-learning the lost knowledge. The story has always stuck with me, mainly because of the intense frustration behind the idea of needing to work so much to regain all the understanding that was forgotten in a single moment. Still, the work of learning and the struggle of meaningful practice are quintessentially Jewish. Continuing to question my approach may be my most religious practice of all.

Entry by: Lily Greenberg-Call

For three years, I have been the third and fourth grade teacher at Temple Israel of Alameda's Hebrew school. Nearly every Sunday, I wake up before any of my other roommates (after all, 8 am on a Sunday is the college student's 5 am), and spend my morning teaching Torah portions, holiday brachot, and Jewish life lessons to my students. It has been one of the most rewarding parts of my college experience, and one of the most difficult. Sometimes I leave the school feeling frustrated, like my lesson did not go as planned and did not connect with my students. Other days I feel elated and proud, knowing I sparked interest and passion for Jewish life in children who will become the future.

Teaching at Temple Israel has been an integral part of my Jewish quest. Although I only spend a few days a month at the school, the people there have become a part of my community. I have been folded into the fabric of the synagogue, with the warmth and open arms of nearly every Jewish space I've been a part of. Teaching, in particular, has connected me to the community in a way I never experienced before. For me, Judaism is about historical memory. It is about preserving the past and passing lessons down to our children, so that the next generation learns from our mistakes and honors our ancestors. Having the privilege to be a Jewish educator and be an active part of teaching that historical memory has helped me distill the meaning of Judaism in my life to a simple purpose: to serve my community, and the human community, with integrity and compassion as much as I can, wherever I can.

I come from matzah ball soup and apple pie. My childhood memories recall tables of loud women chattering over brisket and latkes, and bustling kitchens with pumpkin pies and turkey carving knives. Although I am a practicing Jew, being a product of an interfaith marriage has shaped who I am. I learned the art of tolerance at a very young age. My father never converted, yet he has dedicated the past twenty-two years of his life to raising two Jewish girls and loving an unabashedly Jewish woman. He has been a source of wisdom and engagement on spirituality, science, faith, and G-d throughout my life. My family is a melting pot of different backgrounds, and this helped me learn to break through stereotypes and judgements of people different from me. This background, and the values of service and contributing to the community that my parents demonstrated to me, turned into a commitment to political service as I got older.

Despite my interfaith background, I grew up in a Jewish bubble. Jewish day school, Jewish activities, Jewish advocacy... I used to joke that 99 percent of my Facebook friends were Jewish. Judaism was an inherent part of my life, unquestioned and unchallenged. It was not until I came to Berkeley that I had to answer questions from non-Jewish friends about my connection to Judaism. Why I regularly practiced a religion when I did not consider myself a very religious person. Why I spent so much time at Hillel. How I could be a liberal and a Zionist, a progressive yet deeply tied to an ancient faith, and many other inquiries. These questions floored me. The first few years of college I struggled to define my Judaism, and I searched for answers. Was my Judaism political? Was it spiritual? I have yet to completely define these answers, but several of my experiences with Berkeley Hillel have helped cultivate my understanding.

Last summer, I helped lead a group of UC Berkeley students on a Hillel trip called "Perspectives" to Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Five Jewish students came as facilitators and leaders,

yet we learned as much as the non-Jewish students. We shared stories of our families, the Holocaust, and why Zionism was so important to our refugee ancestors. My fellow students helped me see Israel with fresh eyes and to have challenging conversations. We met with settlers and Palestinians involved in the Shorashim project, a joint-community effort to facilitate dialogue in the West Bank. We heard from Tal Becker, an analyst present at every recent Israeli-Palestinian negotiation. We spent the day with Ihab and Ora Balha, an Arab-Jewish couple living in Jaffa who founded Bustan Yafa, a bilingual kindergarten where Israeli and Arab children learn Hebrew and Arabic side by side.

I wish my years of Jewish day school education had given me this fuller perspective of the conflict, or even addressed the Palestinian narrative. To criticize our own actions does not mean to absolve the other side of responsibility. Judaism demands us to be proactive and responsive in the face of injustice, and we cannot reject applying this tenet to ourselves. On Perspectives, I learned that truth lies somewhere in between the sacred and the profane; that the world is both beautiful and dark. Ultimately, what Judaism offers me is an acceptance of this fact. Life is not about having all the right answers. It is about asking the hard questions: wrestling with G-d not just in your dreams, but in your heart. Judaism accepts the grey area of life, and gives me motivation to seek truth within myself and others. In doing this, Judaism offers me a profound sense of peace in a restless world.

Entry by: Alyssa Haag

I grew up in sunny southern California, in a small suburb of Los Angeles called Palos Verdes. Growing up in an interfaith family, with a Jewish mother and Catholic father, we celebrated both Hanukkah and Christmas for as long as I can remember. Sometimes, when they fell on the same day, we would engage in both holiday practices: light the Chanukiah at sundown and sit around the Christmas tree opening presents, all in a matter of a couple of hours. My younger brother and I would always brag to our friends that we got 8 times as many presents as they did, as most of our friends growing up were not Jewish. When I began the third grade, my parents decided to send my brother and I to religious school. After three years of going to synagogue three times a week, we were given the choice of whether we wanted to continue going. By this time, my brother, a fourth grader and a highly opinionated one, had decided that Judaism was not for him and that he'd maybe like to try his hand at forming his own religion. For me I had completely fallen in love. The Jewish community in Palos Verdes is small yet lively. However small, I had never felt more integrated or welcomed into a community. I continued going to synagogue, joined the youth group, USY, and was an active participant in various programs until I graduated from high school.

When I came to college, I had no idea if or how I was going to be involved in the Jewish community. At the time, I thought that no community would be able to come close to my community at home-- so why would I even try? During orientation the summer before my first year started, I met a fellow freshman who added me to the Berkeley Hillel Class of 2019 facebook page and asked if I wanted to go with her to the first BBQ of the year. Three and a half years later and that girl is my best friend and Hillel is my home. Together, we've engaged others as Freshmen Engagement Fellows, welcomed students into the building as Directors of First Impressions, and have lived as roommates the past three years. If not for her and her warm invitation, my Jewish identity would not have been challenged and strengthened so strongly in the past three and a half years.

But let's get one thing straight, the road has not been easy. There were times where I felt that I wasn't *Jewish* enough to be a part of this community, let alone be a leader of it. There were times when I thought that I didn't want my Jewish identity to be a huge part of who I was and am. And there were even times when I questioned myself and the entirety of the Jewish religion. But it was the people and the community that pushed me to continue my quest, find what Judaism means to me, and run with it. And that's exactly what I did. Freshman year, I went to Friday night services at Hillel-- this was the first time in my life that I engaged in a Jewish activity on a Friday night. After a semester of weekly Friday night services, I decided that the service aspect of the evening wasn't particularly for me. Since then, I have made it my goal to go to a Shabbat *dinner* whenever I can. Junior year, I joined the Berkeley Hillel Student Board as Vice President and the following year, President. These roles and the community that was built within the board and within the larger Jewish community, are my Judaism.

Through the many trial and errors over the past three and a half years, I have come to a realization: Judaism can and should be whatever you make of it. My Jewish quest has taken me all over campus-- from Hillel to Chabad to the Chancellor's office and to the ASUC Senate Chambers. And with all of these stops along the way, one thing has been clear -- the community, the group of people who value their Jewish identity, are those who I aspire to be and befriend and continue to learn from and work with. They are the reason I spend much of

my days at Hillel, hanging, napping, chatting, and laughing. My Jewish quest has taken me very far from that girl who used to brag to her friends about the number of presents she received but let's get one more thing clear, this is only the beginning.

Entry by: Camron King

The Never Ending Jewish Story

If someone were to ask me two years ago how I would describe myself, I might have said: person of color, cis-woman, Arizonan, artistic bipedal human with an affinity for starting books and never finishing them. Among those identifiers, Jewish would not have been found. This is so because for six years after learning about my Jewish ancestry, I didn't know what it meant to be Jewish and whether or not I wanted to be an active participant in that.

It could be said that I was introduced to my Jewish heritage a little later than others. I was approximately twelve years old when my mother revealed to me that she (and subsequently my brother and I) had Jewish roots. For quite awhile, this revelation made me uncomfortable. Like a sweater two sizes too small, it felt like there was no room to squeeze Jewishness into the identity I was creating for myself. Specifically because I did not understand the implications of being a Jew of color.

After a sincere amount of coaxing from my mother, and a move to Berkeley that gave me the space to explore, and the ability to restructure who I was (to a degree) to incorporate my Jewishness into my identity, I began to investigate. I immersed myself in Hillel. I understood that learning about what it means to be Jewish, isn't found simply in academic classes or sifting through text, it's relational, and found in building community and convening with others grappling with the same question. I took advantage of the wealth of opportunities Hillel had available for students from coffee dates with staff and Freshman Fellows to Birthright to joining the Hillel Student Board for the 2018 calendar year. What previously felt unpalatable to me, developed a flavor that brought me great joy. The word "Jew" found a snug place within the lexicon of words I use describe who I am. Although I was able to find this new rooting in my heritage, I realized Jewishness was incredibly expansive and nuanced, which often felt daunting. Being Jewish encapsulates religion, culture, ethnicity, and manifests differently for different people. Simply excavating my family's Jewish history was not enough to fully comprehend who I was as part of the Jewish people. Yes, educating myself on the holidays my maternal grandmother would have celebrated, and the Shabbat rituals and prayers she would have recited over candlelight in the company of family, has been fulfilling and allows me to bond with my grandmother, providing a closeness unattainable via conversation due to her severe dementia, but I was still left wanting. My newly acquired awareness of these Jewish customs and ideas helped me uncover how Judaism could fit into my life to an extent, but I still needed to know something; what did it mean to recognize my Jewish heritage and adopt Jewish traditions and ideology *and* be a Black woman?

I am a person created with a potpourri of parts. The communities I am a part of not only inform who I am, but one another and how I experience each space I enter. My Jewishness and Blackness are intimately intertwined and cannot be evaluated separately, because they are not separate. This prompted me to not just ask, what does it mean to be Jewish, but what does it mean to be Jewish *and* a person of color? It often felt like when moving through Jewish spaces I had to leave my Blackness at the door, and vice versa. When I was asked how *exactly* I was Jewish or if I had come to Shabbat not to enrich my own Jewish life, but to accompany a Jewish

friend, not only did it feel like my identity was invalidated, but the labor I poured into my Jewish community and educational expedition about Judaism as well. I understood that in reality no one could take away my heritage, learning, or the ethnic markers encoded in my DNA, but failing to recognize my multifaceted experience felt like people were. This led to the goal of my Jewish journey shifting slightly. Not only did I want to understand the implications of being a Jewish person of color, I also wanted to create a space for Jews of color so we could learn about ourselves together.

In the fall of 2017 I facilitated the creation of the Jews of Color Collective. I wanted to provide room, for myself and other students who identified as both Jewish and a person of color to explore the unique intersection of these two identities with other people wanting to do the same thing. If there is anything I have learned it is that my relationship with Judaism is constantly changing and growing. I am still uncovering what it means to be a Jew of color and probably always will be. Jewishness is not stagnant or a singular experience. It's dynamic and adaptable, and so am I. Gone are the days of ill-fitting proverbial sweaters, I have entered a stage of constantly learning and challenging myself. Albeit frustrating at times, embracing my family's Jewish story has allowed me to create my own, and such a journey is one I am grateful to take.

Entry by: Ariel Langer

Jew-ish

I lied when I told the College Board that I was not Jewish. From a young age, I felt proud to be Jewish. Pride is not why I lied to the College Board when I registered for AP exams. I lied because I have been told “I’m not *really* Jewish” and, for a long time, a part of me believed it.

I joined a Jewish cultural group at my high school to celebrate Jewish heritage and to be surrounded by people who understood a part of my identity others might have failed to grasp. However, in the small group, I could not have felt less Jewish. When religious figures or events were mentioned in passing, I pretended to understand the foreign sounding names and traditions. I was afraid to admit that despite my internal pride in being Jewish, I knew little about the Jewish religion or the history of the Jewish people. Once a week I sat through the cultural group’s meeting in fear that my tenuous Jew-ish-ness would be uncovered by my classmates.

After attending several meetings, a member of the group felt compelled to compare her Jewishness to mine as if one’s identity could be quantified. After some hasty mental calculations, she concluded, “You are not *really* Jewish,” making a point to emphasize the word “really.” Her comments stunned and silenced me. As someone who had struggled to be externally confident in my Jewish identity, it shocked me to hear one of my biggest insecurities vocalized by my peer. In a matter of seconds, she tried to erase years of Hanukkah prayers, years of hunting for pieces of matzah hidden in the cushions of my sofa on Passover, and years of Sunday mornings spent slathering smoked salmon and cream cheese over bagels. She effaced my identity with only five words.

I never defended myself. Despite the immense pride I had in being Jewish, at the time I did not have the courage to stand up to her because I did not truly feel Jewish. For months her attack lingered in my ears: “You are not *really* Jewish.” Those words manifested all my feelings of not fully belonging to the Jewish community. When I was faced with a question about my religious or cultural identity on the personal information section of an AP exam registration form, I froze. I could hear her words ringing in my ears again. My friends encouraged me to identify as Jewish for scholarship opportunities, but I felt a sense of guilt in taking a Jewish scholarship away from someone else who would be considered “*really* Jewish.” I made the decision to respond “no” to the College Board’s question about my Jewish heritage.

I entered my freshman year of college at the University of California, Berkeley, excited by the opportunity to join new communities on campus and to reshape my own identity. Despite my enthusiasm for meeting new people and engaging in new activities, I was hesitant to spend time at Hillel, a Jewish organization present at Berkeley and on college campuses across the world. Part of me feared that spending time surrounded by my Jewish peers would just further validate my own notion that I was not “*really* Jewish.” I feared that it would be easy for me to negatively compare my knowledge of Jewish culture to the experiences and knowledge of my peers. After attending events at Hillel, I could not have been more impressed by the student center. From grabbing coffee with staff members to participating in a Shabbat service in a stranger’s apartment, I was amazed by how friendly and approachable the people I have met at

Hillel have been. Attending events at Hillel has shown me what it is like to belong to a community, and has made me incredibly proud and unapologetic about my Jewish identity.

Because of the invalidation, I experienced in regards to my Jewish identity in high school, I have a profound respect for other people's ideas, experiences, and identities. I am learning to be confident and unapologetic for who I am. Although at first, I failed to defend my Jewish culture, I am now willing to advocate for myself and for the people around me. I have realized that I have a duty to promote inclusivity in the environments around me through compassion and awareness. My family may not pronounce Hebrew prayers correctly, the food we eat may not be kosher, and we may celebrate Christmas right alongside Hanukkah, but these things do not make us any less Jewish and they certainly do not make me any less proud to be Jewish. These days I will admit with pride that I mix up my *bar mitzvahs* with *bat mitzvahs*. Maybe I am just Jew-ish?

Entry by: Rachel Courtney Marcus

My Jewish identity was inherited. My curly brown hair and deep, dark eyes give away my ethnicity. The olive shade of my skin perplexes people. I inherited my spunk from my Cuban grandmother, who left Lithuania in the wake of the Holocaust. I inherited my reserved side from my grandfather, who was on one of the last Kinder trains out of Austria. I inherited my Judaism from all those who came before me. And yet, my Judaism is my own.

My Jewish journey began at my Temple's summer camp, where vague images of arts and crafts, flag football tournaments, and snack time come to mind. I began Religious School in the second grade and soon it became a staple of my week. It became my main social circle, and the only place where I found myself truly fitting in with the girls. The friendships I made there are still with me today. I still go to The Big Chill to grab frozen yogurt with Maddy and Amanda during school breaks, and I still look more like each Snegg twin than they do to each other. We were together when Matt from NFTY passed away from us much too soon, giving most of us our first experience with death. We were at each and every bar/bat mitzvah as if it was the first and only one we'd ever attend. We understood that we were not only forming deep friendships but ensuring that the legacy of our ancestors would live on. No one instilled in me the importance of Judaism more than my parents, and soon family and Judaism merged into one concept.

We had family dinners every night. I was eager for my parents to come home from work, so excited to share whatever I had learned in school that day. I retold each exhilarating moment that I had raised my hand in class to share, and I loved hearing my parents' stories about work. However, during the days leading up to my bat mitzvah, the fun story time turned to questioning. I was discussing with my family what being Jewish meant, as that was the topic in Religious School earlier in the day. Without any hesitation, I shared that I don't believe one has to believe in G-d to be Jewish. My father, however, disagreed. This was shocking to me. I can still remember how the words leaving his lips felt like a punch to my own identity. I remember the anger rising up inside of me like it never had before. And finally, I remember the yelling.

I screamed that one didn't need to believe in G-d to be Jewish. And how dare *he* say that. I asked him if he knew the words to the V'ahavta? If he knew the meaning of the Shema? If he knew what made the Mourner's Kaddish different from that of other religions? He didn't—and that boggled my mind. I didn't understand how someone could think that one belief defined an entire religion. That the morals, values, and ethics didn't come into play with the Jewish identity. That the belief in G-d could triumph over the shared culture and history. I remember threatening to disinvite him to my bat mitzvah if he truly believed that. It was this moment that I realized what being Jewish meant to me.

It was moments like those accumulating throughout my life that lead me to be on Birthright. When we heard "Judaism is **not** a religion, it's a **peoplehood**," I had never felt more at home. To me Judaism has been a community like no other. My childhood summers were filled with long, sunny days overlooking the Pacific Ocean at Gindling Hilltop Camp. Judaism has become a way for me to instantly connect with someone, to know that they were raised with the same values instilled in them by their parents that my parents instilled with me. *Judaism is the pride of valuing education, the love of ourselves, and the journey of questioning what we are taught.*

But being Jewish can have its hardships. It's having an exam scheduled on Yom Kippur, because no one would even *think* to check the Jewish calendar like the Christian calendar is checked. Being Jewish means being one of the first Jews your freshman year roommates interacted with. Being Jewish means scrolling past hateful and disgusting comments about your people every morning on Facebook.

Being Jewish means being a good person for the **now**. It means I only have one life, and I need to take advantage of *every* opportunity that comes before me. It means that relationships to other people are sacred, and that maintaining them takes time and energy. But for me, it also means being Jewish brings no comfort about death. It has meant struggling with what lies beyond, and finally having to accept that it's the unknown.

Every lesson taught by the Rabbis, every story told by my grandparents, and every prayer read has shaped me to be who I am. My Judaism seeps into my everyday life seamlessly. It's with me when I question unliteral decisions made at work meetings—not be adversarial, but to be able to understand why the decision is being made. Judaism is with me every time I refuse to take an answer at face value, and instead question what is told to me to deepen my understanding. Judaism is with me every time I attend lecture and study, because I know that education is power.

In response to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, my Jewish Quest has been epic. Religion has been fascinating, inspiring, and stimulating. My faith was created by family, and I evaluate the events of today with the values of my culture. My Jewish identity is constantly evolving, growing from the identity of my parents and grandparents to become my own. My religion speaks for those without a voice. The message of Judaism has become the embodiment of who I am.

Entry by Olivia Miller

Move-in day finally arrived, and I was exuberant to start my college journey. By luck of the draw, my roommates and I received the biggest room on campus with the most spectacular view and outgoing floormates. We were all instantly the best of friends after going through orientation and walking together to the Welcome Freshmen events. But, like many good things, this friendship came to an end.

After my two roommates finished sorority rush, I was left in the dark for social gatherings and sought a community that shared my values and interests. My roommates neglected to introduce me to their new friends when they had guests over and excluded me from any activities that they planned with our floormates. I tried asking if we could sit together at dinner, but they brushed that inquiry over their shoulders. Unfortunately, a turn of events was unforeseen in my future which diminished my hope for a comfortable living environment and a community with my floormates. However, I was inclined to research about clubs and organizations on campus which would allowed me to explore my diverse array of academic and social interests. Ultimately, a community that reflects Judaic morals and ethics, such as the creation of an inclusive and ambitious atmosphere, was missing in my life.

As time went on, my roommates became more of a burden to my college experience. Night after night, their unhealthy habits with drugs saddened me because it was a reminder of my aunt's passing due her consumption of drugs. My roommates continued partying and forgetting their keys in the room. Then, they would pound their fists against our metal doors which triggered ripples of gunshot-like sounds. On nights like these I would wake up with a migraine and tension stemming from my heart and streaming through the veins in my arms to the tips of my toes. Frequently, I'd find myself alone in the hallway, letting my tears wet my books and repeating to myself that time will change the course of events. But how many times could I wake up at four a.m. to my roommates and their naked, male guests throwing up in our room, bathroom showers, and hallway? I became a puppet. My sleep deprived, stressed-out body was held by a thin shell of skin that exposed the ripples of my ribs. And my roommates' demands were the strings that tested the longevity of my strength by tearing out my stitching. Stuffing my emotions interfered with my ability to let my positive mindset hold me up. I had enough of being an object that got pushed around and out of my living facility to find sanction.

While growing up my own family member made me feel small, so I was no stranger to the discomfort of being belittled. My father communicated through the banging of furniture and the beating of my body. And as I grew up in an oppressive household, I had always learned to remain small and forgotten. But now, I had to learn how to find my voice and when to use it. I was petrified to speak about my feelings toward my roommates' abusive behavior, but the fear of speaking my mind would further the torment until I used my inner voice.

My quest to find a safe space started my Jewish quest at Berkeley. I stumbled my way to a weekly BBQ at Hillel and was worried that I would be out of place because I was alone. But, to my happy surprise, I was approached and welcomed by friendly faces and hugs - all of who made me know I was in the right place. The moment I enter Hillel, I am always asked how I am doing and can seek guidance in confidential settings or just vent to friends. I feel at home every time I come to Hillel where my ideal, humble community is cultivated. My value of

education is shared by peers, especially during Reading Week, and my admiration for cultural endeavors is energized every Friday. This inclusive environment gives me the support and strength I needed to return to my roommates every night.

During a movie night my roommates hosted in our room as I was studying, I ripped away from my puppet form and cut off their manipulative wires. The stress was pressing on my temples and the voice in my head finally came out, “I’m really sick! Can you please have this in another room?” With disgust that I tried to have a voice in the matter, my roommates barked back to me. The bickering and overpowering continued to break me down until I was ailing and shaking from their tyranny and my poor health. Allowing myself to be vulnerable was not going to help any situation and my realization of this fact encouraged me to no longer transcend to my bystander personality. So, I dragged my body down the hallway to get my Residential Advisor and spoke the truth about the consistent misconduct and bullying.

I surprised myself by approaching the situation with explicit remarks about what I wanted without fearing how the bullies would react. Until I found the community at Hillel, I had gone through almost an entire semester afraid to speak up. I realized I was proud of the person I was becoming and felt empowered, thanks to my Jewish community. Reflecting on my personal development uplifted my spirits and amplified my confidence. The challenge of living with my roommates taught me how to be a bigger person, to rise up, and say the things that might be uncomfortable to address. This semester I’m excited for the fellowships with Hillel whose values I incorporate into my daily life- Crafting Consent and Jewish Learning. After eighteen years of being small, I found my voice in my unanticipated breakthrough on my Jewish quest. I am ready to face challenges with an open mind and optimistic outlook as I expand my Jewish community and friendships at Berkeley.

Entry by: Melody Niv

My Jewish A-B-Cs

“Aleph, be-eh. Gim-mel, dal-et, he-ey” the children recited in unison. A sea of curly-haired, cherubic faces were facing up earnestly, chorusing back butchered pronunciations of the Hebrew alphabet to Ms. Goldstein.

During this lesson, I was so nervous about proving my Jewish worth that I strained to make my voice the loudest and proudest throughout the room. Ima and Aba always instilled pride in me towards my Jewish identity; I needed to make them proud and prove I was a good Jewish girl. With tiny veins in my forehead popping, hands clenched, I was truly giving it my all. Apparently, I was giving it *too* much — I ended up vomiting.

And that was my first day of Jewish school.

As a wise 8 year old, I knew a few things. 1) I'll grow up to be a princess. 2) Boys have cooties. and 3) I was Jewish.

Being Jewish was just another standard component of my life, like having two eyes, breathing, or treating pizza as its own food group. Although it was an intrinsic characteristic of mine constantly reinforced by my parents, I only knew few, superficial characteristics of what Judaism meant.

It meant that 10-year-old me pretentiously gloated about knowing the true meaning of Christmas — a commercial holiday featuring the lie of an old man sneaking into people's houses (and when I do that now, I get a restraining order. Unfair.) Turns out the other fourth graders didn't like that fact all that much. Being Jewish meant that I couldn't eat meat and cheese together, presumably because it tasted yucky. It meant that I sometimes witnessed my mom anxiously pacing while watching the news before urgently calling our family in Israel. Though ignorant of its deeper meanings, I was very proud of being Jewish. I was giddy about being Jewish in the same way that children excitedly recite their parents' political beliefs without really understanding them. I was regurgitating my family's Jewish pride, co-opting it as my own.

As I grew older, this changed. I discovered its solemn history, with modern-day implications, weighing on my conceptions of Judaism. I learned that when my grandfather was nine years old, he escaped into the Russian wilderness to avoid the pogroms and inevitable prosecution in the concentration camps. Although he was able to flee and survive, his family suffered the known, worse fate. I heard similar stories often orated, allowing me to interpret perseverance in the face of adversity as a Jewish value. The tenacious Jewish spirit was a motif in all of the stories I heard, inspiring me. Determination in the face of persecution and adversity was highlighted in all of the holidays we celebrated. If a holiday wasn't about escaping death and then eating copious amounts of food to celebrate, it was about suffering. Let's do a count, shall we?

Passover - We escaped death and became free of slavery; let's eat.

Yom Kippur - We suffered; let's relive the suffering and fast.

Purim - We escaped death and Esther looked hot; let's eat.

Tisha Be-Av - Our temple was destroyed and we suffered; let's fast and *then*, let's eat.

The list goes on and on, but there's a clear pattern: the Jews are morbid.

I carried this morbidity within me, internalizing it. Exchanging religion for comedy in a distorted trade, I performed dark stand-up comedy, continuing the lineage of cynical Jewish comedians in L.A. I convinced myself that I finally understood the true meaning of Judaism, so I could stop studying it and start using it for my own benefit instead.

Comedy became my new form of religious practice. Every self-deprecating joke made me feel closer to Judaism, a little more like Larry David with every laugh I'd get at the expense of my identity. However, I started to notice that the laughs were coming before the punchlines — people were pre-emptively laughing at the Jewish stereotypes I was espousing before I even finished the jokes. I realized that I was perpetuating something malignant. I had done the inverse of my mission; I was exploiting Judaism for my own ego and want of validation.

I had failed at being a Jew, turned it into a joke. This was my epiphany. I wanted to rediscover what it meant to be Jewish. I was done treating Judaism as an accessory, found in the dilapidated clearance bin at your local Claire's.

As I made my transition from Los Angeles, Land of the Jews, to Berkeley for university, I realized this would be a new Judaic experience. Here, I could reset my preconceptions of Judaism.

With trepidation, I stepped into Hillel for my first new Shabbat. Spoiler alert: I didn't die. I actually did better than I did that first time in Jewish school; I didn't throw up even *once*. Like that first day, I wanted to prove my Jewish worth. But this time, it wasn't for my parents. It was for me. So, I introduced myself to the people sitting at my table. I talked to every Levy, Ruben, and Kaplan out there. And unexpectedly, I discovered something wonderful.

These students were just like me. They were *also* unsure in their Judeity, also felt like they were 'faking it'. I wasn't alone anymore in facing Jewish 'impostor syndrome'. However, I've come to understand that the Torah is full of questions; Jewish scholars constantly question our religion and it's actually *suggested* to maintain our curiosity towards Judaism no matter our experience. What I thought made me less of a Jew actually turned out to be a key marker *in* my Judaism. But what makes me Jewish isn't any single, specific aspect. Going to temple doesn't make me a stronger Jew. Neither does keeping Kosher. It's a collection of miniature actions, behaviors, beautiful and inclusive in their fluidity, connecting us to one another and upholding the Jewish spirit and values. It's been an arduous journey to come to this realization, but I feel stronger in my Jewish identity than ever before.

Entry by: Ella Pallenberg

In ninth grade I traveled with Rabbi Jocee Hudson and eight other members of my class from Temple Israel of Hollywood to the nation's capital through a program created by the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism, designed to involve young, Reform Jews in the American political system. For five days, we visited monuments, museums, and landmarks, learning about our nation's history and the policies that shape our country. Every day we chose from endless amounts of seminar topics about everything from the conflict between Israel and Palestine, to criminal justice reform, to environmental issues, to advocacy for minorities and women's rights, and so many more powerful lectures. We then listened to breathtaking presentations which gave our eager, young minds a better understanding of the controversy surrounding these ideas and the many responses Jews were taking. Some of the seminars were devastating to hear while others were interesting and educational, but all were incredibly inspiring. This journey to Washington D.C. culminated with each of my classmates and I presenting a speech to the Congressional representative from our district about an issue we cared deeply about. I spoke to Congressman Brad Sherman about the Employment Non-Discrimination Act and left that room a changed person. I felt empowered. I felt I could effectively communicate my ideas and actually make a difference in the country and world I love so dearly. It was in this congressional office that I began to understand the true meaning of one of the most vital stories in Judaism.

The story of Jacob wrestling with G-d (Genesis 32) is what makes our community vastly different from all others. Other religions teach G-d's word to be the ultimate truth, that G-d's will created things the way it is, the way it is supposed to be. But not us. For as long as I can remember, my Jewish community has taught me not to take things at face value, to search for a greater or underlying understanding, to question and wrestle with what we are given.

My Judaism teaches that I must question the world around me. One of my favorite quotes that I learned in Hebrew school is, "Tzedek tzekek tirdof" or "Justice justice shall you pursue" (Deuteronomy 16:20). As Jews, we are encouraged to wrestle with G-d. As Jewish-American citizens, we should take this principle to wrestle with our own government, struggling in our own political system to bring about justice for all peoples. We Jews have an obligation to get involved and become Jewish political activists. We are not only accountable for ourselves but for making our world a more just place for the people who cannot do it for themselves, because we know from our history how it feels to be in that position. This is why I am immensely proud of the large number of Jewish social justice organizations which not only stand up for Jews, but for all victimized, persecuted, and vulnerable people, even when it is difficult. The wrestling is not supposed to be easy, but in the end, we might just receive a blessing as Jacob did.

Being an activist is my form of Judaism, my form of prayer, and my form of tikkun olam. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said of his participation in the Selma to Montgomery march with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. when fighting for the Voting Rights Act of 1965: "I felt as though my legs were praying." It is my belief that, just as Heschel and many others have done before us, we should take our Jewish values of questioning and challenging injustice, and put them to use in our own political system. It is not only our obligation to society, but to our faith. I can do this by participating in elections, teaching others about important issues, standing up for myself and others, continuing to learn and think critically about my country and religion, and by simply being an activist.

So when asked “What is your Jewish Quest?” I can think of many answers. Some might say their Jewish quest lies in strictly following the words of the Torah. Others might fulfill their Jewish quest by going to Shabbat services every week, keeping kosher, or becoming a rabbi. But My Jewish quest lies in questioning. My quest is to be the change I want to see in the world. It is my Jewish quest to wrestle with the status quo and to stay strong when fighting for my beliefs, my values, and for justice.

Entry by: Allana Paren

Wholly Embracing My Jewish “Half”

Growing up, society impresses upon us that we must fit into categories and that we must be labeled as one thing or the other. This is how we begin to understand how to interact with others around us, since these labels and categories offer us some sort of context for comparison.

However, as the daughter of a Polish-Russian Jewish mother and a Cuban Catholic father, where did I fit in? Kids my age got confused by the fact that I could be placed in multiple spheres – I was that blur of two circles overlapping on a Venn diagram. I never got fully accepted into the Jewish community at my school, since my sister and I did not attend Hebrew or Sunday school, and I did not fully relate to the other Hispanic students, since I did not have a large Cuban family that fostered any heritage pride in me. Friends started calling me the “Jewban,” a dub that would stick as my descriptor even today. When it came time to apply for colleges, I found myself having to choose between one option or the other when it came to how I identified, and I realized that for people like me, the fellow hybrids of society, it is hard to navigate in a world that wants to consolidate you into a singular attribute.

Despite feeling widely misunderstood throughout my childhood and teenage years, by the time I was eighteen and ready to enter UC Berkley as a freshman, I had grown into an independent and ambitious young woman. I had made it my goal to make this world a better place than when I had entered it, including bridging the gap between various cultures so that there is less delineation and prejudice within society. In an effort to achieve these goals, I knew it would help me to explore the parts of me that I wished to become stronger rooted in, and to enter into communities that I felt I had not been accepted into before.

My first stop: Berkeley Hillel. A lot of people assumed, especially thanks to my “Jewban” label, that I was “half Jewish,” half Cuban, since my dad is Catholic, but given that my mom is to thank for my Jewish lineage, I knew that I was fully Jewish. Starting college gave me the opportunity to shed this feeling that I did not deserve an invitation to participate in the Jewish community, so within my first week at Cal, I stumbled into the Berkeley Hillel building, hesitant and wondering if I would find myself once again on the periphery of another social circle. Upon entering, I realized I had just been absorbed into a wonderful world of love, appreciation, and support. There was no minimum level of Judaism required to get an invitation; for the first time, I felt whole. Life on the outskirts of all the labels I was entitled to had gotten cold, but now I was right in the middle of people who shared a common thread with me, and my heart and soul felt warm. This warmth sparked a large fire within me; I reached a new level of involvement in this new realm that was greater than I ever imagined I could attain in any given societal space. I became heavily immersed in Challah for Hunger, and am currently now the proud co-president of the Berkeley branch. I attended my first services and celebrated Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur more devotedly than I had ever before. The messages of this community spoke to me, because no matter who you are, or what your level of religiousness is, you are permitted space and comfort out of the graciousness of strangers’ hearts.

Next Stop: Israel. While the friends, experiences, and teachings that I had gained at

Berkeley Hillel had all provided me with immense fulfillment, my journey had just begun. The light of the fire that had been stoked within me was guiding me towards the Promised Land. I wanted to drench myself in the culture of my people, something that I had finally realized I had a right to do. In Summer 2018, I embarked on my Birthright journey through Berkeley Hillel, in discovery of my roots. One of the most profound lessons I learned on that trip, and something that I now try to integrate in my daily life as much as possible, is the idea of loving-kindness, a concept stemming from “chesed,” which appears in the Torah. This idea, that we as individuals should extend our love to everyone and do our best to understand and exhibit kindness regardless of differences, really spoke to me. I realized that this was what made the Jewish community so special and why it was the first group in society that had welcomed me so whole-heartedly, when I finally had the bravery to step within. Since my lifetime goals include helping people to find their own sense of belonging, along with better understanding and tolerating groups outside of their own, I am proud to have my basis in the Jewish community, one that promotes open-mindedness and above all, loving and respecting everyone.

So, while my goal in life is to journey to nearly every corner of this planet and experience a wide array of people and personalities, I will always be on my Jewish quest. A quest is inherently a mission, and mine is to take the foundation of Jewish ideals and teachings that I have learned, and bring them with me throughout all of my endeavors. I believe that in doing my personal best to pay forward the love, support, kindness, and wisdom that the Jewish community has imparted on me, I will not only be upholding myself to such standards, but I will be paving a path for others to follow. Hopefully I can illuminate the fact that no matter the number of boxes one can check off on society’s list of attributes, we should all be capable of loving and accepting another human being, regardless of what or how many labels they have themselves.

Entry by: Anonymous

In Yiddish, there's a common expression: *toyre iz di beste skhoyre*, or, in English, Torah is the best merchandise. At first glance, this saying is a reminder not to get too wrapped up in the secular world of material transaction, but rather to remember that the best resource we have at our disposal is the Torah. I heard this saying a hundred times—always appreciating it for its cutesiness and, as much as I hate to admit it, for its “old world charm.” But over the past couple of years, since I decided to make my Shabes practice regular, this saying has taken on a greater personal significance for me.

Our world is in a moment of extreme turmoil. Human beings are forced to confront and contend with fundamental challenges to truths that have long been taken for granted. Climate change is increasingly affecting our day-to-day lives, threatening the sense of security many of us have had the privilege of enjoying for years. Meanwhile, the #MeToo movement brought the experiences of so many women of harassment, abuse, and exploitation to the forefront of the public eye, challenging our society to recognize that the system of gender inequality and misogyny that has persisted for far too long is no longer sustainable and will no longer continue unchecked. In the midst of all this chaos, human defense mechanisms kick in. Somehow, we adjust. We adjust to extreme and unnatural conditions—to a world where fear, uncertainty, depression and distrust are the status quo. But for the mind and body to constantly be in crisis mode—that, too, is unsustainable.

This is where Shabes comes in. When everything we know and rely on to keep the ground underneath steady is changing, Shabes is the most reliable resource I have. What a precious gift to inherit.

Judaism has instilled in my body a rhythm; a sense of internal time. Time that is both eternal and boundless, but also, perhaps most importantly - cyclical. Six days a week, I question what my work is doing either to hasten or delay the end of time: the end of life as we know it. But one day—Shabes—I get not only to dream, but to experience the world *as it should be*. I let the status quo of chaos disappear to the background while I return to my deep truths—the ones that cannot be touched or compromised by the news or by the rampant hostility in the world around me. We cannot do *tikkun olam* and repair this world, or create *a shenere, besere velt* without first feeling and dreaming up what that better, more beautiful world will look like. Shabes is our model for positive change. Shabes is the opportunity to take one day each week to be whole. When I invite in the Shabes queen and her angels, sometimes it is the only occasion in the week where I feed myself with something other than the material comforts that have proven to be as much a curse as a blessing. This spiritual engagement is a powerful and necessary means of survival that is often neglected.

I came of age in post-9/11 New York City. The events of that day marked a dramatic shift in how the collective consciousness of my family, community, and city saw the world, understood the security of our places in it, and related to the people around us—both at home and globally. Distrust of others became normative. This legacy is still alive in American culture today. As a queer person, I have had the experience of being seen as a threat on many occasions, even from a young age. My humanity as a queer person is only taken for granted in certain contexts. When my future and the futures of my loved ones feel more uncertain than ever, I return again and again to what I can be certain of in my heart—that Shabes will come again; that everyone

in this world, no matter who they are, has that inalienable right that even the worst evil cannot take away: time. Time transports us when we are stuck. As Abraham Joshua Heschel reminds us, when so many of us are unable to access the bare necessities of safety, guaranteed food, water, and shelter—let alone luxury—in space, Shabes still affords us access to the Palace in Time.

Capitalism today places the weight of our survival in our ability to effectively perform a given role. When I surrender to Shabes, I can just be myself. When everything is prepared ahead of time, all there is left to do is simply exist. Free of work, stress, conflict and fear, Shabes challenges the dominant notion that consumption and productivity are the things that sustain us and give our lives meaning. As I fulfill my commandment to *zokher* Shabes, I remember what it is that really sustains me and makes me human: intimate connection with others, song, prayer, and holiness. In fact, on Shabes, we are so human, that each of us is given a second soul, a *neshome yeseyre*. The more I beautify and devote myself to that holiness, the more I get back, and the more I am empowered to perform meaningful work in the week ahead.

The lesson of the present moment is that no product, no amount of money or success, is worth compromising our humanness. Heschel warned us that when we are driven by materialism and competition rather than the love and compassion Judaism offers us, we fail. *Toyre iz di beste skhoyre* does not tell us to reject material goods; rather, it suggests that the most important material, and sometimes the one easiest to lose sight of, is that which feeds the soul. Shabes provides me the tools to survive the demands of the secular world I inhabit by forcing me to recall and to follow my own, internal, Jewish clock—the one whose time leads me through the harsh realities of our world, but always towards wholeness.

Entry by: Matt Rich

My Jewish journey started when I came to college. There were several paths and parkways I walked along before that, but you can really only make a journey when you're the one driving, and up until that point, not only was I not driving, I hadn't realized that I wasn't at the wheel. Berkeley was a new start because for the first time I was at the wheel, parental tracker in the car notwithstanding. I didn't know much, but I knew that being myself wasn't supposed to feel miserable, so I set out to find what exactly being myself would entail in this brave new world where I was in charge.

Now, for a bit of context. I grew up in coastal suburban SoCal, the kind of coastal suburban SoCal where people are only as Jewish as the mandatory assimilation permits. And assimilation in my hometown was unquestionably required, and extremely unkind—it permitted very little. The thing about that is that my family is first generation American, and my parents are desperately bad at assimilating into any social norm. My dad is third generation Israeli, and my mom is Uruguayan Ashkenazi. They met when she was at the Technion. She is the kind of engineer that is not good at social niceties, and while my dad tries, he's only really good at it in comparison with her. We were desperately ill-suited for any kind of assimilation when I joined the picture in November 1998, their 5th year in the US (my mom completing her doctorate at USC), and being the only really visible Jew in the class was a lot for a really long time. That's not why I bring this up, or why I explained my hometown.

The thing about my hometown that, even in Jewish (as in Jewish-American) circles, people are hostile towards being too Jewish. There are paywalls to every Jewish experience, and most adults spend a lot of time talking about how they're only raising their kids Jewish to honor their parents. It's kind of miserable, and before Berkeley I didn't think anyone derived any pleasure from being Jewish, but honestly, that's an aside. The point is, the only Hebrew school in the area that didn't require the very expensive synagogue memberships of the area was from the Chabad folks from the JCC. So, for the vast majority of my childhood, a sizeable chunk of the adults I was exposed to with the most regularity were extremely frum and to this day I am still deeply affectionate towards the people who essentially helped raise me, the child of two emotionally vacant working parents.

Now, for some more context, I have in the past year had the conscious realization that I am a trans guy, but even as a child I've always been a bit genderweird. I was a weird kid, raised by two socially inept engineers, and I enjoyed much about the rigidity of the frum experience. I liked that there were rules while the rules of the outside world were nebulous. I briefly considered yeshiva, because that was what I thought the path to becoming a frum wife was. *'if this is womanhood,'* I thought, *'i can do it.'* The implication always was, that goyische womanhood was always going to be out of reach for me. It was, but not exactly in the way I had expected. These days, I am glad I did not follow my ten-year-old self's whims. The Chabad folks came into my family's life at a weird time. My dad was alienated by American culture, isolated from an extended family system that had helped raise him and thinking that the only way to be American was to ignore his unease at the system of the nuclear family. The systems of chabadnik childcare gave my dad a sense of ease. I learned brachot and established a sense of myself as, if not Jewish in fact, at the very least wanting to be. In my hometown, even wanting to be "really Jewish" was taboo.

I refused to assimilate without even realizing it, chafing under the role of the token Jew that I found myself in even in classrooms with other Jewish kids. I was always visibly excited when we sang Chanukah songs during the winter concerts, and chafed at the Christmas themes. School was miserable, but at least on the weekends there was a reprieve, even when it was the engine of ridicule in my secular life. I acted out and questioned in Hebrew school like I never did in secular school, but was met with kindness, not the harsh unforgivingness of the secular school system. The Hebrew school's head rabbi was kind, and my parents liked him, but more importantly I liked him. It's hard to overestimate how rare that was for adults in my life. I volunteered at the Hebrew school after I 'graduated.' I went to a two-week frum sleep-over summer camp once in spite of my dad's skepticism. I got bat mitzvahed, like my parents wanted. I left.

But when I came to Berkeley, I didn't have the kneejerk skepticism toward religion my dad had. I didn't have the draw towards American Christianity that had enthralled my mother, or even my sister's passion for assimilation. I thought of religion as a gentling force, something that, if you could seek out the right niche, it would find you so you could find it.

I am now three years into my Berkeley experience. I have joined congregation Sha'ar Zahav in the city, have shabbats with dear friends, and am on the board of Hillel's QJew club. I feel free to decide what brand of religiosity is right for me, and while I miss the people from my JCC acutely sometimes, I do feel empowered to make my own Jewish journey now. As a trans man. As a gay man. As an ex-chabadnik. And as (to whatever extent) a religious and secular Jew.

Entry by: Jacob Adam Schwartz

Flexing my Talmudic Thinking during Sixth Grade Question Time

First order of business: When I stand before my class of hyperactive sixth graders – familiar faces that I’ve found waiting for me in Room 217 each Tuesday, Thursday, Wednesday afternoon for one, two, three years now – I guide my stride to the faded whiteboard and write “BS”D” on the upper right hand corner.

Scratch that - I don’t write BS”D – I write “Bet,” “Samech, “Dalet.” For those of you who know what you know, you know I write ב"ש"ד. But on this American computer, even that came out backwards - and when I typed it using Google Translate’s Hebrew keyboard, I watched in horror as the website instantly translated the whole mess as “BDS.” But oy – I’m off on a tangent again.

If my middle name weren’t Adam (read ADAM, as in YA’AKOV ADAM ben YITZCHAK DANIEL - SHISHI), it would be “tangent.” Or “side note.” Or as the Sages would call it, “D’var Torah.” You know – that rhetorical exercise where the Rabbi starts outlining the parameters about building a Sukkah and suddenly the lesson is about the amount of sunlight that gets absorbed in a valley. Or when you try to ask your Rabbi why you can’t use your phone on Shabbat and your answer is delivered three stories later along with an advanced circuitry lesson and a few choice ramblings about the nature of creativity. In other words, I have ADHD. In other words, I think in circles rather than lines. In other words, I think Talmudically. My ancestors speak to me and through me, and their wisdom ways have left their mark.

Second order of business: my students love tangents. In fact, we spend the majority of our lessons following tangents of their choosing. Once I etch Hashem’s emblem on the corner of our whiteboard, “question time” begins, and they bombard me with inquiries ranging from the philosophical, to the mundane, to the just plain insane.

“is YouTube kosher?”

“Why should I believe in God?”

“What does God say about breaking up with your girlfriend?”

My students love tangents because they know their questions always get answered – with an added bonus or three. I’ve figured out over time that the best way to reach a room full of Jewish kids coming from a full day of public school is to let them show me what they need. Some days they’re joking when they ask – when B asks what the Torah says about silly putty, I know he’s looking for laughs. But when J asks God’s favorite color, she probably genuinely wants to know. For both, I give them an answer that tackles far more than the question yet somehow falls short of answering it directly– a Jewish answer.

“How do you make everything Jewish?! I asked a question about my Apple Watch! Not keeping Shabbat!”

Third order of business: everything is Jewish. That is, everything can be made Jewish when we let ourselves see its Jewish core. That is – Hashem is everywhere, in everything. God is One. God is in the watch, is in the silly putty, is in the classroom walls. As one of my Rebbeim at Orayta taught me – “God is the piece of paper, our universe is a circle on the paper, and our

world is a pinprick right in the middle of that circle.” Yes, the quintessential lesson of Judaism - God is the quintessence of everything. But how to confine “everything” into something digestible? How can I show the Infinite through the finite? How can I explain God?

That’s the fourth order of business. Also known as the fourth dimension. That’s the place where dog equals three because that’s how many stages of embryonic development it undergoes in the womb, where Torah is literally water, where angels run and return like electrical currents - the place where kids derive their ingenuity, madmen mine their inspiration and prophets experience their secret mysteries. Fourth dimensional thinking, which is circular thinking, which is ADHD thinking, which is Talmudic thought – this type of thinking lets me show you God in the tree, God in the book, God in the song, God in the website. This type of thinking is what Ibn Ezra meant when he composed the poetic lines of “Ki Eshmera Shabbat” – “I will rejoice in the Torah of God, and it will wizen me.” Through learning Mishna, through learning Gemara, through learning all the forms of our fascinating Oral Torah – I derive not only the pleasure of studying God’s word, but the lasting cognitive evolution of learning to think like some of the greatest minds of the Jewish people. This is what Rashi means when he famously says that “Ya’akov never died” in Parshat Vayechi – all Jews since have simply been building on his worldview and ideas. How can one die when their mind lives on?

So this is the essence of my personal journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, from a lack of acceptance for my ADHD scatterbrain to unconditional self-love and appreciation. Learn, align, practice, and teach. When I learn without breaking into that quasi-meditative state of Talmudic thinking, I can hardly keep track of the Sages as the roller coaster of their thoughts careens recklessly around the amusement park pages. And when I try to teach before temporarily suspending my keenly developed palette of “practical,” logical thought processes, my inner reservoir of Torah knowledge disappears. When I try too hard to think about how to make Torah interesting to my kids, I end up going to great lengths to repackage the depths of our tradition – a package they seem to find even less appealing. I’ve learned to trust that the wisdom of our Sages, reflected through the wit and wile of a Torah steeped mentality, penetrates the armor of the most apathetic hearts. When I trust that the Torah’s jewels shine brightly enough on their own, the kids keep asking their questions, and I always have an answer.

Entry by: Olivia Shane

Every Sunday at religious school I put one dollar of my own money in a small box passed around labeled “tzedakah.” For a long time, the action meant simply the loss of a hard-earned dollar, but I came to understand how that dollar helped others. Tzedakah referred to the money collected once a week at my synagogue for various philanthropies, and has always represented the most important aspect of why I spent time every week at our temple with a community of people who taught me the importance of doing what is right and just by caring for those in need. My Jewish heritage has played a significant role in my need to bring positive changes to my community. From the ages of four to fifteen, I attended religious school at a small, young synagogue. My family’s involvement in its growth and leadership meant a lot of weekend time for me at the synagogue, gardening, babysitting and preparing for holidays. Additionally, I spent time visiting ill and elderly congregants and collecting food and clothing donations for a nearby underserved community. Being Jewish has led me to a unique community to which I belong, and one in which I have always taken pride. Although anonymously giving money to a charity can make a huge difference, I wanted to feel a personal connection to the organization and meet the people I was helping.

Two years ago I served as a board member on the South Peninsula Jewish Teen Foundation, a program designed to teach and support high school students as they manage their own philanthropic foundation. Through this experience I learned how to conduct social justice research, write grants and fundraise for a cause about which I am passionate. As a board of 24 Jewish high school students, we created the mission to “support the health of women affected by violence in the Bay Area, Israel, and around the world.” We raised over \$60,000 and I personally raised \$2,500. My personal mission was to raise money for Ruby’s Place, a local shelter for survivors of domestic violence and human trafficking. While meeting with the founder of this shelter, I was astonished to learn how many cases of domestic violence and human trafficking there were in just the Bay Area alone. After hearing the survivor’s stories, I felt a responsibility to contribute toward their healing and empowerment. Violence against women is a global issue that a small group of high school students cannot solve on their own, but through my experience with the Jewish Teen Foundation, I gained the knowledge and leadership skills needed to continue making a positive impact on my community and beyond. I had done previous volunteer work at my synagogue, but none was as impactful as the Jewish Teen Foundation. I feel that it is my obligation to not only give back to my community in the Bay Area, but also the Jewish community overall. My current short-term Jewish quest is to stay involved in the Jewish community, whether by attending Shabbat services and dinners on Fridays or just going to hang out on Memorial Glade to eat bagels with other Jews at Berkeley.

I want to make others feel as welcomed and loved as the Jewish community made me feel at home and now at Berkeley. Going into my second semester at Berkeley, I plan to get involved with more of the Jewish organizations and clubs on campus. I already order challah on Thursdays through my sorority to support the organization, Challah 4 Hunger, but over the longer term, I would like to get involved with Israel-centered organizations, such as Bears for Israel, especially as I prepare for my birthright trip to Israel.

My Jewish community taught me the importance of Tikkun Olam, the Hebrew phrase for “repairing the world” to improve the lives of those around us. I learned the value of hard work, discipline and the importance of using one’s own success to give back to others. I believe my religious education combined with my family’s cultural values have given me a better understanding of my place within my community, and perhaps more importantly, my place within the global community. Together the values taught to me by my Jewish community and my involvement with the Jewish Teen Foundation have shown me how a well-run organization can effect social change. In the future I hope to further my Jewish quest through an outreach role at Berkeley to help spread the message of Tikkun Olam to other students.

Entry by: David Shelton

“Mom, Dad...I’m an atheist.” My mom calmly and confidently chimed, “Oh honey, you’ll find your way back to G-d someday.” You’re probably confused why I’m starting my Jewish quest with admitting to my Born-Again Christian parents that I didn’t believe in any conception of G-d or religious practice. Really, to get to the starting point of my quest, we have to walk back a little further in my life. Back to when I was only four or five, and we would sit around for our nightly family bible reading. As we plowed through the book of Genesis, something popped into my mind: “Where did G-d even come from?” I blurted out. I couldn’t help myself. “Well, we will just have to wait and ask Jesus when we get to heaven,” my parents retorted, somewhat bothered by my impatient interruption. That wasn’t good enough for me, so I pushed back; and I kept, and keep, pushing back.

Now, I’m not here to tell you some sob story about my family or about how having goyish parents was so awful... I can’t fit all that in 1000 words. No, I’ll start with freshman year – a likely place embark on a quest. The relationships I expected to garner wouldn’t cross over into the religious, because really, who in their right mind comes to college to get religious. I was going to join a frat, smoke a lot of weed, and hopefully end up with a high paying job on the other end. After making several close Jewish friends and going to Hillel BBQ for the obligatory free food, I signed up to be a part of organizing Hillel’s community meal, a shared meal with food insecure members on the Berkeley campus. Through that, I started to poke at more questions surrounding Judaism. I started to see what a Jewish practice looked like. For me, religion has always been an interesting topic, but this was more than interesting. It was magnetic. There was something inside me that was pulling me towards this tradition and people. It was the puzzle piece that fit so well into the slot of religious life. A piece that played a big role for so long, and a spot I thought I didn’t have a capacity for, or somehow operated above. Judaism blew open the door to the concept that those questions that had previously been brushed off were really what should be relished. It opened my eyes and made me wash, taste, move, speak, and sing. It showed me place. Place in a community that was held by much more than just a day of the week and similar perspectives.

By the end of my first semester, I knew that conversion was the path I wanted to take. A super fun path of limbo and rejection, but also of thought and action. I started joining learning fellowships and groups, engaging actively with Jewish text. Approaching questions in a Jewish way...with more questions. It was exciting, energizing and invigorating. But what I’ll call the convert curse of “three-times the charm” rejection, set in. One - a friend that summer snapped to me that I “just went from one crazy religion to a different one,” after I refused a bacon wrapped date. Two - my cousin choked up as she told me “I’m just really worried about you going to hell. But I’m going to keep praying for you.” Three - a guy I was dating implied how much smoother things would go between us if I just dropped the whole Jewish thing. While all these words got to me on some level, they made me question my intent in becoming a Jew. Now looking back on those moments with a little more perspective, I weirdly thank the universe and G-d for those moments. They kick started a pivotal understanding of what it is to toil with a Jewish existence, some with an unhappy sliver of anti-semitism I’m sure, but opened me up to the great internalized wrestling match that is being a Jew.

Fast forward a couple years and I land myself in the Berkeley Bayit Jewish Cooperative, after I decide to free myself from the tyranny of having housemates who get bacon grease all over the

kitchen when they cook. The Bayit wasn't supposed to mean more to me than a kosher kitchen, cheaper rent, and potentially a couple good friends. However, to my surprise, it meant more because creating my own Jewish life in a Jewish home gave power through agency, to the intent behind a lot of Jewish tradition. It combined the warmth of consistent community that supported you in your everyday life, with the intent to create meaningful Jewish practice with those closest to you. Fast forward another year and I'm sitting down with Rabbi Adam. He asks me if I would be interested in a Conservative conversion, I say yes, giddily, as I think about all the time it took me to get to this moment. I was finally on a path to get some resolve from the limbo of not being a Jew, but actively participating in a Jewish community and life. Every other Friday I meet with him, we learn a bit together and I bounce a few questions and concerns off him. This process of inching to the finish line has been continual, but I can almost taste the freezing salty sludge of bay water as I am dunked into the mikvah. There's time now to think about the entire process of internal toil and questioning that brought me to this point. My quest has led me from questioning G-d's existence, to reaching conclusions of my own, and then asking more questions. That's my response to "finding my way back to G-d" and I wouldn't be satisfied or fulfilled otherwise.

Entry by: Alexander Ullman

“Well at least here we get a woman’s perspective. It’s sad. Gerty is so pitiful.”

“What’s Bloom doing sitting out on the beach all alone? Spying on a woman taking care of children? It’s kind of creepy.”

“I think he misses his son. He can’t raise his own son, he can’t have his lost boy, so the only way he can experience it, is through her, by watching her.”

“Maybe he’s reliving his relationship with his mother. Spying on women nurturing. That’s very Joycean you know, very Christian. ‘The mysterious embrace.’ That’s what it says here. I mean, it’s hard enough to find someone who’s *not* your mother to have sex with.”

“Oh here we go, with the sex again.”

“Well, long ago, before I converted, I went to Catholic school, and they told me that if I wasn’t a virgin no-one would love me.”

“I taught at Notre Dame. And let *me* tell you about those priests...”

In this typical, upscale reform synagogue, where everything is made out of wood and glass, beside the sanctuary and behind two sliding doors, there is a small library. The walls are filled with pictures of rabbis and cantors, the shelves with encyclopedias, bestsellers, and religious commentaries. In the center is a long plastic table. Every Saturday morning, eight Jewish women and I sit around it for our *Ulysses* reading group. We dump our Penguin editions out of plastic bags, unroll our readers guides, sharpen our pencils. We begin right at 12:30.

As the only member under sixty years old and the only man, I am definitely an outsider in this group. But I have to tell you that this is the most Jewish experience of my life, a sort of milestone in a long and complicated trek. To explain *why*, I have to recount the Jewish quest that brought me here.

When I was twelve, two months before my bar mitzvah, my grandparents took me to the Holocaust museum in Washington, D.C. I remember the ticket-taker handing me something at the beginning of the tour—a passport of sorts in the shape of a Jewish star—to help me feel like I was one of the victims. And at the end, my grandparents and I lit candles for the lives lost in the Shoah. But my most vivid memory is standing in a dark room, placing my hands on the white barriers in front of televisions that showed the stockpiles of bodies and the sadistic Nazi doctors. I couldn’t really see over the barriers, and my grandmother said, “No point in looking, it’s awful.” Of course, this is exactly what I wanted to see. I thought it would unlock the key of what it meant to be Jewish: to confront such clear hatred, such overt violence. But I couldn’t see over the barriers. Hell of a knight’s training, to make the end goal so visible and the path so obscured.

A few years later, I found out that my mother wasn’t Jewish. Well, she was but not *really*. My mother picked me up in her convertible on Wednesdays from confirmation class. One night, I

asked her if she had converted because of my father. It was winter and we had the seat warmers on, but the canvas roof of the car let in the chill, so I put my hands under my butt to keep them extra warm. I knew that she had grown up Protestant. But I had for many years told my friends and myself that she had converted *before* she met my father, out of her own will, out of resistance to her own father's brutal patriarchalism.

"Yes, I converted for your father," she said.

My father came from wealth. He commuted daily to the garment district on Seventh Avenue in New York City, and he and my mother didn't really talk. I realized here that I had invented my own origin myth, one that confused identity with authenticity. I had to admit that my family unit was not held together by any religious belief, but by class longing. My mother had married "up." I looked up at the thin canvas roof, deflated. My Jewish armor felt cracked. Ersatz.

Later on in high school, my friend Ernie invited me over to have spaghetti with his family. Their Pennsylvania forest house was so warm: dark wood paneling, green carpeting, and yellowed lampshades. What amazed me most was that they actually ate dinner together. But what I thought would be an easygoing family dinner with Ernie's parents and brothers turned into an unexpected duel, some sort of conversion ceremony. As soon as the meal ended, we were suddenly all out on the porch, standing in a circle. Ernie's father was saying we should go around and give our thoughts about Jesus. I was mortified and confused, my bare feet gripping the red brick floor. When it was my turn, everyone looked at me. My first dragon.

And a decade later, I met my girlfriend's family in Sacramento. Why did I feel so at home in these Christian households, so lulled by board games before dinner, by a fire crackling into the night sky? When it was time to say grace, her Uncle Jack took me by surprise: "So, Alex, what do you think about Jesus?" I blinked. "I don't really think about him," I stuttered. Uncle Jack later sent me a Starbucks gift card as an apology. The struggle to find friendship and love in my life was beset by this two-headed dragon: an attraction to familial stability that I conflated with Christian belonging.

But maybe "quest" is the wrong word to describe how my Jewish experience has unfolded. I have always felt outside any romance and triumphalism one might associate with Jewish identity, but I still find such tropes useful to think about, even as I'm rejecting them. Maybe the quest is a kind of "anti-quest"—a journey within. For what all these battles I've recounted have in common is that each time, I was faced with something that I am *not*—a victim, a Christian, an authentic Jew—only to discover that I am not something else either.

I have learned to feel a comfort in this repeated othering by turning inward: by reading, by interpreting, by reflecting. But I have also learned that others feel this way—that Jewishness is an ongoing, deliberative anti-quest. Perhaps that's why being a part of a *Ulysses* group in a synagogue—moving at a Talmudic pace of four pages a week, laughing about Joyce's pornographic obsessions, puzzling over the strangeness of the Eucharist, following the quest of his Jewish hero—is the most Jewish I have ever felt.

Entry by: Dominick Van

While the details of my Jewish quest may differentiate it from other Jews, I believe that all of our quests are of a similar nature in their goal: the experience of living a Jewish life, however the individual may define it. I have yet to determine what Judaism means for me, precisely. My Jewish quest may simply be the journey to answer this question. Most likely an answer will become more and more clear, but never completely reached; it might just be the asymptote of my life.

I did not grow up religious. My mother, coming from a Jewish household, and my father, coming from a Christian one, are not religious. My sisters and I were raised in what I refer to as the secular, American tradition: we grew up with Christmas trees and Easter egg hunts, but no church—or synagogue.

My first exposure to Judaism came from my grandmother. It was nothing direct, just items and moments that I remember from my childhood: a rabbi's portrait hanging on her wall and her sticky notes held by a menorah-shaped vessel with "Shalom!" written across it in large cursive script. The first time I heard about Israel was when she bought me a globe and spun it to the Middle East, pointing to some country on the edge of the Mediterranean: "That's Israel. Do you see it?" she asked me. I nodded my head, though I had no idea what she was pointing at. It was only years later that the small country I could not see on a map would become important to me as my passion for politics met my embrace of Judaism.

My interest in history augmented my interest in family history, and, by extension, my Jewish heritage. It stretches back far in time, but my knowledge begins with my great-grandparents, two Russian Jews living in Kiev under the regime of Joseph Stalin. They came to the U.S. with a miniature Talmud and Torah among their meager possessions. My grandmother had a doll of a peddler in her house, his back heavily-laden with goods—an homage to her immigrant father's job in the United States.

Coming from a secular household, I was unsure about how my parents would respond to my interest in Judaism. I finally told them about my interest when I was 13 (an auspicious age, looking back). Driving back from the Bat Mitzvah of a family friend, my dad kept talking about how great the sense of community was. I took this as a natural opening, and shared my newfound interest in Judaism.

My parents could not have been more supportive. We joined our local temple and my dad and I enrolled in a Judaism 101 class with the rabbi. We celebrated Chanukah and Pesach, and I went to temple on the High Holy Days. I worked as a counselor at my temple's summer camp, and I joined a youth group. My grandmother and I bonded over Judaism, and I would tell her the latest facts that I learned from books.

Eventually she moved into a Jewish retirement home, SeaCrest Retirement Village. She was not fond of the place and abhorred what she viewed as a loss of her independence. I visited her weekly and we attended Saturday morning services at their onsite synagogue. I do not think that either one of us had been so observant before in our entire lives.

The story of my family is an integral aspect of my Jewish quest; it serves as a sort of prologue which explains how I have ended up here, in the present. I think it parallels the phenomenon by which the communal Jewish experience over the past four thousand years is a part of the memory of every individual Jew—I was freed from Egypt. When I see Kiev on a map, I can remember my great-grandparents, characters in a narrative that I have never seen, but met through a miniature Talmud and Torah.

With the passing of my grandmother in 2015, I became the only practicing Jew in my family. I do not go to synagogue weekly, wear a kippah, nor pray daily. I keep semi-kosher, refrain from using G-d's name in vein, participated in a Hillel fellowship, and keep up with Jewish and Israeli publications, such as the *Forward* and the *Jerusalem Post*. A great deal of my Jewish identity is now manifest in the political maelstrom faced by the State of Israel.

Knowing the history of the Jewish people, the history of the modern State of Israel, and the state of contemporary politics, I can say, unequivocally, that I am a Zionist. I believe in the necessity and moral ground for Israel's existence. Even beyond Israel, Judaism has affected my political views and priorities. Compassion and my understanding of *tikkun olam* has influenced my views on immigration, environment, welfare, education, and foreign policy.

My passion for history brought me to Judaism, and that passion, mixed with politics, has helped me to sustain it. I have had crises of faith where my belief in G-d is seriously questioned. I have not resolved this issue but I consider wrestling with this question as a part of my Jewish quest.

Judaism for me is not a religion, nor an ethnicity. It cannot be the former as there are secular Jews. It cannot be the latter as one may convert into or out of Judaism. In this magnificently flexible tradition, the best term I have found is *peoplehood* or *nation*. The Jewish people, despite all of their differences—differences which, I believe, only serve to make the tradition more dynamic—are, nonetheless, one people.

Notwithstanding my relationship with G-d and relative ignorance of Torah and Talmud, this conception of being a part of an ancient people grounds me in Judaism. My Jewish quest, then, is also largely an exploration and embrace of this people, which includes my family as well as the Jews of today, tomorrow, and yesterday.

Entry by: Shelby Weiss

My Journey to Community

It was a lonely long-weekend at Georgetown University in fall 2016, with most of the East Coasters back home or visiting friends. I told myself I would stay at school, hopefully make a friend or two. I told myself I would go to the Jewish Student Association's "Bagel Brunch."

The Facebook event said, "You know the drill, arrive early if you want lox!" I would strategically arrive 30 minutes late. By 11:30 a.m. it was bound to be bustling with potential friends.

11:20 a.m. struck. I hesitantly made my way there. It felt like the drive to the camp bus stop and the first day of middle school all at once.

The room was almost empty. The lox was untouched. The only guests present appeared to be the JSA Board, the hosts of the event. But they didn't even glance up from their conversation to greet me, their first and perhaps only guest.

Unsure whether to stay or go, I decided to at least get some breakfast. With my bagel in hand, I at least felt somewhat purposeful, a little more comfortable. Then came the question, however, of where to sit. None of the board members offered for me to join them. So I timidly sat down at the adjacent table, and ate my bagel in silence.

I waited for something to happen. I waited hoping that suddenly I would have the courage to introduce myself. I waited expecting that in the next moment, someone would clear a space for me. I waited wishing that more people would come streaming in, and sit down at my table. I waited for 30 minutes.

Then, as quietly as I had come, I left. Choking back tears, I all but ran to Darnall Hall. With my roommate home in New York, I knew that I would have some privacy. Despite my hopes of making friends, I ended the weekend the same as I had started it: all by myself in room 628. Somehow, though, my room felt less lonely than the brunch.

Within a few weeks, I had decided to withdraw from Georgetown. It had become increasingly clear that it was neither the right time nor place for me.

Suddenly I found myself redoing the entire college process. When I committed to Berkeley, I wasn't sure that it was what I wanted. After all, I had turned it down the year before fearful that I would be swallowed up by the sea of 30,000 students.

My parents had to drag me to Hillel's L.A. meet and greet. I argued with them that no one would be there, that it would be a total waste. In truth, I was afraid that everyone would be there, but that I wouldn't connect with any of them.

After some introductions and small talk, the students all crowded around a group of

upperclassmen eager to share with us their tips and tricks about Berkeley. I so badly wanted to be like them—at ease, happy, surrounded by good friends.

As I walked out of the event, I was glad that I had went, but still felt as though I hadn't made any lasting connections. I hoped that those were yet to come. All of a sudden, my mom was striking up a conversation and then introducing me to her new friend's son: Sam. This moment would later be described by Sam's mother as "basheret."

I kept bumping into Sam all over the place. And when you're programmed to feel unwelcome and invisible, the feeling when someone knows your name and calls out to you is indescribable.

I can now see that my parents and Hillel knew something that I was not able to recognize then. A few friendly faces and some name tags can go a long way.

At my first Hillel events, I was haunted by that memory of the bagel brunch. But these events felt different. I was always greeted at the door with a smile, and so many people would already know my name. And those who didn't yet would learn it so quickly. I was constantly introduced to others, and would undoubtedly leave knowing more people than when I came.

Rabbi Adam likes to tell a story of a woman who attended all of her synagogue's functions, and yet, after years and years, she left the congregation, because even in attending all of those events, she never once felt seen or recognized.

I was that woman. And while I left Georgetown, I decided that here at Berkeley, I would not leave the community, but instead be in it.

So thankful for those who welcomed and accepted me, I decided to pay it forward. I have made it my personal mission to meet new people, learn names, or just say hello. I spend every Wednesday at BBQ and every Friday at Chabad; I study for hours each week in Hillel; and I now serve as the Co-Engagement Chair on the Hillel Student Board.

My family and friends tell me that I have "become more Jewish" recently. That I suddenly am taking more pride in my religion or connecting more deeply to my faith. That I do more "Jewish things." Sure. But it is not so much that I have discovered my Judaism. I've found my community.

Community is a Shabbat dinner where you have to push and climb while making your rounds to say hello. Community is being unable to study effectively at Caffè Strada because you know everyone there. Community is locking hands with hundreds of friends and peers in memorial of the victims in Pittsburgh. Community is crying when Hillel's Freshman Engagement Fellowship ends.

It wasn't until Berkeley that I learned the true meaning and value of community, and first genuinely began to seek and create it. I am often asked if I ever regret leaving Georgetown. I always answer, "No." My journey may have taken 5,000 miles round trip, but I finally found what I was seeking.

Entry by: Talia Wenger

Why I Keep Kosher

In eighth grade, in response to a prompt about how I identify myself, I wrote an essay titled “American Jew or Jewish American?” I explored which identity was more important to me: my American citizenship or my Jewishness. In my mind, this question could only have one winner. One of the two had to be stronger and more fully encapsulate my values, community, and connections. It was mutually exclusive: I had to pick one, and I picked Judaism.

As a young teenager, I made no connections between being Jewish and being American. My family emphasized Judaism far more than our American citizenship. The majority of my friends, family, and close communal ties were Jewish. I went to Jewish schools until I was thirteen, was an active member of a Jewish youth group, and went to a Jewish camp for eight summers in a row. Being American was just the backdrop that allowed me to safely and openly be Jewish.

As I entered high school, and to a greater extent, college, being Jewish required more active participation. I had to seek out Jewish clubs, friends, and communities. I had to decide to talk to professors about skipping class to attend service for high holidays or fly home for Passover Seders with my family. And as I became more aware of social and political issues around me, I realized that it was not enough to just be a Jew living in America. I had to find a way to bridge the gap between my Jewish identity and American identity. As my life expanded outside of Jewish organizations and the comfortable communities I grew up in, I either had to bring Jewishness with me into my other activities, organizations, and passions, or compartmentalize.

My Jewish Quest in college was to be more intentional with my Judaism and to bring it into my everyday life. Part of being intentional was defining my practices and why I do them. I’ve kept kosher both in and out of my parents’ house since I was twelve. I originally started to keep up with my older siblings, even if it meant turning down the orange chicken at Panda Express. Overtime, keeping kosher made me feel like part of a community of Jews. Many of my Jewish friends in middle and high school kept kosher and it was something we could discuss, and sometimes agonize over, together. But moving to Berkeley, most of my friends did not keep kosher; many weren’t even familiar with the term, and it made me feel like an outsider when we went to the dining hall or out to dinner.

But keeping kosher now serves a new purpose in my life: it reminds me that I’m Jewish, and that being Jewish comes with a set of values and ethics. At every meal I’m reminded of my religion and that parts of it that are important to me: Tikkun Olam, social justice, and human dignity. Rather than keeping my Jewish values separate from my identity as a UC Berkeley student or citizen of the United States, I can use them to inform my actions and opinions. Jewish values do not have to remain in my conversations with Jewish friends or activities at Hillel; they can inform my everyday interactions, my goals for the future, and the way I engage politically. When I’m deciding what to eat for dinner, I’m reminded that the ethics I learned in Judaic Studies class in Jewish day school don’t need to remain exclusively in a Jewish context. Jewish history, from the Spanish Inquisition to the Holocaust, can imbue the way I treat people in my everyday life, and inspire the way I vote based on how I want the American government

to treat its people. In being more intentional with my Jewish practices, I found a way bring centuries-old texts and values into my life as a young adult living in America.

Yet, my Jewish Quest is far from finished. Though I have found ways to incorporate certain ethics into my daily life, I still grapple with some of the teachings in the Torah and how they can be brought appropriately into the twenty-first century. I continue to think critically about Jewish practices and traditions, and I struggle with those that don't align with my values in an attempt to bridge the gap between an old religion and a modern society. There is much work to be done in my Quest to be intentional in my religious, social, and political life. But at the very least, I know that each time I have to choose between a hamburger and a veggie burger, I'll be reminded of my Jewish Quest, and the work I still have cut out for me.