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I did not enjoy my experience at the Kotel this summer.

What? What's that, you say?

You heard me correctly. I did not enjoy my experience at the Kotel. I'll tell you why in a little bit.

I went on a Taglit-Birthright trip in June this year with 40 people I had never met, from all colors and stripes of Judaism. There was everyone from the I-feel-like-a-fraud-because-my-mom-converted-but-now-practices-another-religion Jew to the I-read-Torah-every-week-and-teach-Hebrew-school Jew. Seeing such a wide spectrum of ways to be Jewish helped me feel more comfortable in my new skin, but it also raised an age-old question.

What does it mean to be Jewish?

## Exploring Jewish identity

As a new convert, I always find it funny when born-Jews say I'm more Jewish than they are. I can't speak Hebrew, nor read it fast enough. I've never had a bat mitzvah ceremony. I didn't grow up eating rugelach and kugel and challah. What do they mean when they say I'm more Jewish?

I don't know. Perhaps it's because I step foot in a synagogue more than twice a year. Maybe it's because I study a little Torah. It's definitely not because I went to Jewish summer camp or day school or grew up in a Jewish household. I certainly don't feel more Jewish than a born Jew. If anything, I have to work for my Judaism. There were so many times in Israel that I felt like my Judaism was "not good enough", that I wasn't Jewish enough, whatever that means, for the Israelis who accompanied us on the trip. I suspect that they were just as surprised to see such a wide spectrum of Jewish observance and knowledge in us as we were in them.

The "traditional" religious ones' standard for Jewishness seemed to be related to ritual observance. "You don't keep kosher? You drive on

Shabbat? You're not Jewish yet!"

On the contrary, the secular ones couldn't care less. Their Jewishness was more nationalistic, more cultural, something they just were. In their heart.

So what is it, then, that makes you and I Jewish? What difference does a dip in the mikvah make? What is Judaism to me, now?

Being in Israel gave me the opportunity to step back and reflect. Seeing all the places that the Bible talks about--the shining walls of Jerusalem; the place at the Ein Gedi oasis where David cut off a piece of Saul's robe instead of killing him; the Negev, where God promised Abraham that God would make his descendants as numerous as the stars; the Jordan Valley, rich farmland flowing with milk and honey--simply being there brings a certain tangibility to the stories in the Bible, making them seem more real for me than they do in my imagination. Especially wandering around Masada: This is where the Zealots died, this is where the Romans came in and overtook the fortress, this is where King Herod entertained his guests, this is where a little bit of history happened.

As a newly minted Jew, going to Israel carries a special significance. One of the speakers at Independence Hall in Tel Aviv said, “Wherever you are in the world, you have a home now.” As the home of the Jewish people, in a theoretical sense, Israel is my home now. It looks a lot like San Diego, with the beautiful desert landscapes and dry weather, but it does not feel like home.

### **An experience at the Kotel**

Our last Shabbat in Israel started at the Kotel. After lighting candles we walked there for Kabbalat Shabbat. At the walkway overlooking the Kotel, I saw for the first time just how overtaken it was by the Orthodox. A sense of dread, the first all trip, overcame me, and I felt terrible. This is the Kotel, after all. I thought it was supposed to be for all Jews, not just the Orthodox. This is the holiest site in Judaism, all we have left of the old Temple mount.

The men’s section was easily two-thirds, if not three-fourths, the size of the women’s section. There are special walkways built that lead into the men’s section so the yeshiva students can walk directly in, unobstructed and

undistracted (by women, yes, but by just about anyone else, too).

As I made my way down the women's section, getting closer to the wall itself, I could hear the joyous fray over on the men's side--shouting, singing, dancing--and noticed some of the women peeking across the mechitzah. I don't blame them. I wanted to be over there too, dancing and singing. I felt excluded from a large part of the service. Why weren't the women doing the same?

What was on the women's side? Lots of private, personal davening. No praying in groups. I felt alone, even as I was surrounded. I don't think there's anything wrong with private, personal davening. I just don't prefer to pray that way, like an island among islands. I like to pray like we do in shul: Together, as a community.

What did I do? I had my prayer, one from my parents, written on a scrap of paper. I walked up to the wall, pressed my forehead into its smooth, cold stones, ran my fingers across them. I said the Shehecheyanu, for lack of something else to say. I stuffed it into the highest crack I could reach. I felt

totally silent, totally quiet, but only for a moment.

As I backed away, I laughed to myself, for most of the women present wouldn't even consider me a Jew, if they knew who I was. What right had I to come there and take up a position at the Wall?

I have to admit, I was quite disappointed. I had been looking forward to visiting the Kotel. Maybe I was expecting something magical to happen, a feeling of "wow, you're Jewish now, and here you are touching the Wall, and it is now part of your history, and you of it." There was no such moment for me. Maybe there will be for you. I could not get past the deep feeling of separation and exclusiveness it represented for me. Maybe I'll have a better time at the Conservative wall next time I go.

What did my experience at the Wall teach me about my Jewishness?

It taught me to appreciate how good we have it here. It taught me to appreciate the pluralism present in Jewish ritual and practice. It taught me that I have to accept my Judaism for what it is, and not worry about

whether someone else thinks it's "good enough", and know that Judaism is not a fixed point. For me, Judaism is a journey, an experience, a way of living in the world and with it. I have much to learn, still.

In short, visiting Israel did change my life, and when I figure out how, I'll let you know.