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One God, One People

Heenay matov umaniyim. Shevet achim gam yachad. How good and pleasant it is that friends sit peacefully together. At the JCC preschool, where I started my educational journey, we would sit on this big green carpet and sing *Heenay matov* at the beginning and at the conclusion of each school day. How good and pleasant it was that we sat peacefully together. In my preschool class there were all different kinds of Jews: kids who came from Orthodox families, Conservative families, Reform families, kids with only one Jewish parent, and even kids who were not Jewish at all, but whose parents were attracted to Jewish life. Every one of us had different customs and beliefs, those that at that young age we had already inherited from parents and grandparents. Inside a cozy classroom of four-year-olds, however, labels and denominations simply did not matter. 14 short years ago, in a world that was discovering the beauty of diversity education, we were encouraged to share our differences. Caring teachers created a climate in which varieties of expressions of Jewish life were celebrated. All we absorbed at that tender age was that we were a group of Jewish kids, Jewish four-year-olds who scurried each morning and afternoon to take their place on a green rug and sing together in peace, *b'shalom* – together, *b'yachad*.

As we grew up, our differences gradually emerged as more significant than our one sustaining and most significant similarity. We did not see each other on *Shabbat* because we were praying at different synagogues. We split up to attend different summer camps. Somewhere along the way, in our elementary school years, we began to discover that our expressions of Judaism each had a name and often with that name there were associations – some positive and others negative. We suddenly became labeled not as Jews, but as specific kinds of Jews. It is bothersome still when I recall when, in second grade, one girl from my green carpet circle of friends questioned the authenticity of my Jewish experience. While it was innocent and not at all meant to hurt my feelings, it was shocking. Never had I felt that I was actually different from another Jew. How did that happen? How is it that we became known not as Jews, but as the label that defined our *kind* of Judaism?

For some, these labels are comfortable and defining, but not for me. I had no label because I was never sure where I fit on the Jewish spectrum. I am the child of two Reform Rabbis, I have studied at two community day schools and spend every summer at a Conservative summer camp, not exactly the most constant Jewish childhood. As a result of this diversified education, there is no way that one “kind” of Judaism can describe my beliefs or specifically define my place in the Jewish world. Rather than follow a very specific path, I have over the years created my own path, my own Judaism, one that cannot be described by a board of Rabbis. I find meaning in a wide variety of Jewish observance and more

importantly have derived much wisdom and insight speaking with and learning from Jews who interpret our shared faith quite differently than I do.

This past summer, I sat, looking out over the city of Jerusalem with a friend who is Orthodox. We could see the outline of the Dome of the Rock, where the Temple once stood and where he believes it will stand again. We talked about the coming of the Messiah and what that phrase actually entails. I told him that I believe it is a metaphorical coming, a symbol of a time when there will be peace in the world, and my friend told me that he believes that the Messiah will be an actual human being, a descendant of King David, who will arise and turn the world toward Judaism. I learned more from that one conversation than I could have in two weeks at my Jewish Day School. It occurred to me as a result of that conversation that I had never had a conversation about Judaism with an Orthodox Jew before, probably because I had never been around them. I could not believe that I had spent so much of my life ignorant of the beliefs and customs of my own people.

Thus anticipating Jewish life on a college campus is exhilarating. I can imagine no greater blessing than spending *Erev Shabbat* meals with Jews of all denominations. I look forward to engaging with others, without the separation of sects, seeking to discover what unites us rather than what divides us. This is my vision of an ideal college *Shabbat*. Of course, I plan on taking Jewish Studies courses and am eager to learn from amazing professors. I absolutely want to advance my rusted Hebrew language, but beyond the classroom, my greatest knowledge will no doubt emerge from my Jewish peers.

College is my opportunity to have many more conversations like the one held in Jerusalem with my first Orthodox friend. I will be attending Yale University where there are roughly 1,200 kids in the incoming freshman class. According to statistics, 25% of these freshmen will be Jewish. That means there are 300 Jewish teenagers in my class alone. What does that represent? It represents the opportunity to engage in conversation with 300 distinctly different Jews, the chance to learn 300 *nigunim* (wordless melodies), to hear 300 stories, and to listen to 300 Jewish journeys from peers who sat on so many different preschool rugs around the world. College presents a remarkable opportunity to explore in a playground of ideas and challenges in which my Jewish horizons will be broadened, stretched, pushed and hopefully challenged. Whether the background of these conversations is Jerusalem or a dorm room, a *beit midrash* or a coffee shop, I know that these dialogues will be the best and most important way for me to find my Jewish self. I look forward to discussions about why a Jew should or should not keep Kosher, about arguing with each other whether or not women should wear *kippot*, *talitot* or *tefillin*, by wrestling with our complicated texts, by teaching each other tolerance with an eye toward building a more pluralistic, tolerant Jewish community that my generation will inherit.

Here in Columbus, my synagogue, Temple Israel, is located fifteen minutes away from my house. Tifereth Israel is five minutes in the opposite direction.

Agudas Achim and Ahavas Shalom are in between, and other Columbus synagogues are located even further away. At Yale, there is one building, one center in which to pray and learn. Reform services in the lounge, conservative in the chapel, Orthodox in the library, but, meals: together, studying: together, Birthright trips: together. So many aspects of Judaism can be practiced inter-denominationally. There is no need to separate due to technicalities, and this central building is the physical representation of the cohesiveness that could be the Jewish people. Even when visiting, browsing through the library, sitting in the cafeteria, I could feel that it was a place for all Jews to gather. I will take advantage of this building, what it represents, and how it can be used to unite the Jewish community.

Heenay matov umaniyim shevet achim gam yachad. This is the song we sang together in preschool. Upon reflection it is likely the first Hebrew song I ever knew. Over the years I have learned to sing more and more Jewish melodies and have come to realize that song is the greatest vehicle for connecting my soul to God. One precious gift that I recently received was the invitation to teach a song to a group of Jewish teenagers from widely diverse backgrounds. One friend in the group who identifies as “traditional” knew many, many songs but, she revealed to me, not mine. We embraced when she told me that in singing this new melody, she felt a newly enriched connection to God as well. Her comment moved me mostly because I know that it was difficult for her to learn a new melody to a text she had been singing her own way for seventeen years. It is not easy to sing new melodies, to open our minds to new ideas, but we must in order to become the best version of ourselves. College is the chance for Jews of all creeds to struggle with each other, to take difficult risks, risks that may or may not pay off. Whether or not they do does not matter. Only if we commingle, exchange melodies and philosophies, can we create a truly Jewish environment, one flowing with new and strange ideas. I want to help form a togetherness not found in Jewish camps or synagogues. I want to be a part of the beautiful harmony of pluralism, sit on a new green carpet and, as I did in preschool, sing with others in peace, without the barriers of denomination.