

My Relationship with Judaism

A coincidence is defined by most as two or more things happening simultaneously by chance; most see them as pleasant encounters that cause a momentary feeling of significance. In my lifetime, however, there have been too many occasions that are too rare to be a coincidence. My interpretation of these events is grounded in Judaism. These “non-coincidences” have not only been the framework of my being, but they have served as clear pointers during uncertain times.

For instance, my cat rarely enters the basement, which is where I write songs; he is very skittish. He rarely initiates play and will hardly approach anybody except for my brother. One afternoon, I heard four tiny footsteps pat down the stairs and a smaller, playful chirp to accompany them. I looked up from my songbook to see my cat dropping his favorite toy on the carpet before me and stretching. The song I was writing was about how much I loved him despite his nature and lack of verbal communication. The most recent lyrics on the page read: “Silence has never been so sweet / You don’t need any words to garner love from me”. Amused, I picked up the toy bird he dropped on the floor. I knew that not only was I talking to my cat, but I was also talking to G-d; a communication barrier now broken.

Once the pandemic hit a year later, my nights were spent messaging crisis counselors in an attempt to find structure among the daily uncertainty. “Okay Ava,” They would ask, “What are five things you can see?” *Everything is blurry*. “What are four things you can touch?” *I can’t move*. “What are three things you can hear?” *It’s silent but I can hardly hear myself think*. “What are two things you can smell?” *My candles*.

Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, I would gather old candles from around the house and light them on my nightstand. My candle fascination gave me both a way to occupy myself and a slight feeling of control. The longer the “two-week” quarantine extended, the more the candles became an emotional crutch. I started to become dependent on the flickering from my nightstand. Soon, the thoughts came rushing in. *I am just like my candles I am temporary I will be thrown away when I’m finished burning too...* I was obsessed; I needed to be in control. I needed that same connection, that same astronomical significance, my cat brought me a year ago. It was in the candles.

I had never stopped believing in Judaism, but I started to worry that I was too flawed to have been created in His image; I was an outlier. A void had now spread throughout my body.

The feeling stemmed from my chest traveled to my toes and fingers. *I am unlovable I am temporary I will disappear when I finish this last candle...* Staring at the pool of wax, guilt collected in the back of my throat. It was only hours from burning out. *Does G-d hate me for being imperfect?*

I dragged myself down that evening. I saw my mom cooking over the stove with an unusually optimistic attitude. “Hi hon,” I saw a paper bag on the counter. “I found a lot of coupons online for Yankee Candle so I got you a whole bunch of new stuff.”

Reaching into the bag, I grabbed a two-wicked candle called Sea Salt Surf. I stared at myself in the reflection of the glass. The thoughts moved me to tears. *I am just like this candle I am vibrant and bright and hand-crafted by Him to be beautiful and...*

An object as simple as a candle made it clear to me what I am meant to keep doing: To pursue my studies, chase creativity, enjoy life’s smallest pleasures, and most importantly to follow the signs G-d grants me daily. This deepened understanding of my spirituality not only helped me find the resilience within myself, but guided me towards self-love. Guidance is everywhere, especially in life’s most basic amenities such as music and working with kids.

The music program at Temple Beth Miriam has allowed me to teach children how to spread love through music and forgiveness; as a lost, anxious teen, the biggest thing in my way was my lack of self-forgiveness. By making our classroom and the sanctuary a place where mistakes are okay, I am ensuring that every child is not as hard on themselves as I was. Whether I sing the incorrect lyrics or miss a chord or two when playing guitar with the cantor, I lead by example and keep going even if my mistakes are met by giggles. Through music, I have been able to connect with kids 5-13 years old stronger than I have with my classmates at school; some of the most timid children open up as soon as the first chord of TBM student-favorite *The Dinosaur Song* plays. Regardless if the kids are pitch-perfect or dramatically out of tune, being able to hear their smiles while singing is more rewarding than anything.