

When you are alone, home practice loses much of its meaning. I have tried lighting Shabbat candles in my home, but without a family to share the blessing, the ritual carries far less emotional weight. Devotion, to me, is more meaningful as part of community.

Barbara K. Shuman: My husband and I first joined a congregation shortly after our marriage. I was 23 and he was 26. We were both fresh out of graduate school and strangers to Pittsburgh. My husband’s boss was president of the temple and “encouraged” us to affiliate (I think at the time we thought this was a condition of his being hired!). My initial expectations—of becoming part of a community—were soon met. We joined a young couples club and made deep, lasting friendships. We were also “adopted” by older members, who taught me how to make matzo ball soup and gefilte fish—dishes my mother had never cooked. For years our first congregation was the center of our social life, and truly our extended family. It was also the place where I learned how to be a serious Jew and raise Jewish children.

Andi Rosenthal: When I was a 1st grader at Immaculate Conception School, my mother was extremely active in the PTA, meeting weekly with the Monsignor to discuss after-school enrichment programs. Each week the nun who answered the door at the rectory would call out, “Monsignor, the mother of the little Jewish girl is here to see you.”

As the child of an interfaith marriage—Jewish father, Catholic mother—attending a strict Catholic school

where the nuns still dressed in habits wasn’t as strange for me as one might believe. Ironically, I felt extremely comfortable in a school where our teachers talked about God as if He were in the room and encouraged us to share



A moment of togetherness during a High Holiday service at Congregation Or Ami, Calabasas, California, 2007.

our desks with our guardian angels.

In 3rd grade I left Catholic school to attend public school. I was shocked at the change in environment. Suddenly, nothing was sacred. The worship of clothes, toys, and popularity replaced the worship of God and the striving toward elevated ethics.

One Saturday morning in 1983, at the age of 13, I happened to attend a bar mitzvah and for the first time in my life heard prayers being chanted in Hebrew, evoking in me an emotion unlike any feeling I had ever experienced—as if I’d finally come home to the God and the angels I had abandoned so long ago.

Determined not to let the feeling go, I began, with trepidation, to explore my Judaism. I can still remember the feeling of terror at my first Shabbat service. From the minute I walked into the sanctuary, I was certain that everyone could sense that I didn’t belong. But I was wrong. Never had I experienced a warmer welcome—a congregation full of people ready to smile and introduce themselves, to direct me to the right page in the prayer book, to offer a heartfelt *Shabbat Shalom*. I became a regular attendee at Friday night services, and it seemed that the more I embraced congregational life, the more warmly and lovingly was I embraced in return. At

the age of 31 I was ready to convert. And during my conversion ceremony, my rabbi and congregation made me feel as if my joining the Jewish community was a gift to them, but I knew in my heart that I had received an even

greater gift—the gift of belonging.

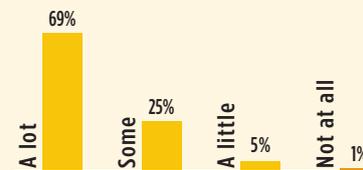
Dawn Moltenkopf: I was not initially attracted to Reform Judaism, or what I *thought* was Reform Judaism. When I was growing up my mother used to hold up my grandparents

as an example of secular Jews who all but flaunted their lack of observance and spirituality. My grandfather was an atheist and my grandmother at best agnostic, yet they identified themselves as Reform Jews. Christmas trees and ham sandwiches were as common in their home as bagels and lox, and synagogue attendance was limited to *simchas*. Therefore I associated Reform Judaism with a non-committed, non-spiritual, “Judaism lite.”

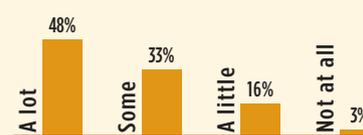
When I began my own study of Judaism as an adult, I first attended a

A BIGGER PICTURE

How much does being Jewish involve being part of a Jewish community?



How much does being Jewish involve attending synagogue?



—SURVEY OF 10,250 SUBSCRIBERS TO “10 MINUTES OF TORAH” AND THE URJ’S “WEEKLY BRIEFING,” THE RESEARCH NETWORK, 2007

THE RABBIS SPEAK

“We are committed to strengthening the people Israel by making the synagogue central to Jewish communal life, so that it may elevate the spiritual, intellectual and cultural quality of our lives.”

—A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism, CCAR, 1999