

Shaping My Jewish Identity

Zoe Kress

Zoe Kress attended Barrack Hebrew Academy in Bryn Mawr, PA and currently is rising sophomore at the Albert A. List College of Jewish Studies, a joint program between The Jewish Theological Seminary and Columbia University. She was one of six recent high school graduates who participated on the research advisory committee for the Jim Joseph Foundation's new report, [Effective Strategies for Educating and Engaging Jewish Teens](#).

First, I just wanted to say what an incredible opportunity it was to be able to participate in this research. Coming from a strong Jewish background, it was definitely exciting to both share my own Jewish experience and hear other people's stories. I learned so much about myself and participating in this research really helped me appreciate my Judaism.

Judaism plays such a fundamental role in my identity. Without a doubt, this is due to the fact that I have been immersed in Judaism my whole life. While my mom always encouraged me to continue with my Jewish education, in the end, it was always my choice to pursue a Jewish education and create a Jewish identity. I think, that no matter at what age, I found something attractive in Judaism and this motivated me to be involved within the Jewish community.

Entering freshman year of high school, I wasn't really looking to expand my Jewish circle. I had developed my Jewish identity through Day School and I didn't feel the need to participate in specifically "Jewish" activities. That said, I still found myself most excited for activities that included my Jewish network of friends within the context of a "secular" programs, such as co-ed dances, going to the movies, getting free Starbucks (and by the way, food is always a great motivator), and other activities that met my idea of what a teenager was supposed to do. As a freshman unwilling to venture outside my comfort zone, I always attended these events with my Jewish friends. Therefore, it was the combination of having that sense of familiarity and the interest in doing activities that weren't necessarily Jewish that ironically drew me into Jewish programming.

Although I certainly had a Jewish identity as a freshman, there was a richness to Judaism that I never really appreciated until I got older and matured. As a senior applying to colleges, I also became

more interested in leadership roles and community service. Judaism always emphasizes the importance of the Kehila (the community) and Tikkun Olam (repairing the world), and while these values are instilled in many teenagers, for me, these activities became more meaningful because of Judaism. By taking on leadership positions within the community and performing community service, I connected my everyday life with Judaism. I was more open as a senior, more adventurous, and more willing to see how Judaism relates to and enhances the activities of my everyday life.

My final advice therefore is this. When developing programs for freshman, it is essential to create friendships and relationships. It also is important to remember that, especially as freshmen, teens are not necessarily willing to explore their Judaism. They do not want Judaism to take away from a “normal” teenage experience. So when thinking about future programs for them, develop activities that are part of the regular freshmen experience.. As teenagers mature, however, I think they are more open to Judaism. Regardless of their specific age, programs should show teens what Judaism has to offer, allowing teens to pick and choose which aspects of Judaism - whether it is community service or leadership roles or Israel advocacy - resonate with their own identity.

Participating in this research experience definitely was an eye-opener and forced me to think about what it means to be Jewish. By the end of the day, I was able to appreciate my Jewish identity even more because I realized what value it has in my life.