

Find one Jewish Teen; Others Will Follow

Allison Luton

Allison Luton is from Syracuse, New York and will be a second-year student this fall at the Fashion Institute of Technology. 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.](#)

In high school I was not very involved in Jewish life, which I now deeply regret. However, at the time, I did not think much about being Jewish. My community's Jewish population was very small and continuing Jewish studies past one's bar or bat mitzvah was unusual. I also was the only Jewish teen at my high school, which certainly contributed to my apathy about continuing any major connection with Judaism. Instead, I became deeply involved in my high school. I joined many clubs and organizations and had many different groups of friends. Like most teenagers, they definitely influenced my involvement in certain activities - I wanted to spend time with them and do what they wanted to do, which obviously was unrelated to Judaism.

I think that I was uninterested in Jewish life because I went to a public high school and religion, especially Judaism, simply was not a priority for most students. Had I attended a Jewish high school, my experience might have been much different. Yet, there were moments with my friends when my Jewish identity would grow. All of my friends knew I was Jewish and from time to time would take an interest in my religion.

In retrospect, I think my Judaism was a kind of "identifier" in my groups of friends in a positive way. In fact, I recall specifically one day in my chemistry class – in which I had many close friends - when a classmate asked me when Hanukkah started that year. It happened to be the next week, and each classmate begged me to bring in a dreidel and teach them how to play. So the next week I brought in dreidels and explained the game. I can honestly say that I have never seen a group of sixteen year olds be so quiet and focused in my life. In high school, those little instances were my version of Jewish life.

Fortunately, I also had a small group of Jewish friends with which I had attended Hebrew school, and we are still, to this day, immensely close. But throughout high school we would only see each other twice a year; at Hanukkah and Passover at one of my friend's homes. We would have dinner, and on Passover a seder, but it was never about actually sitting down and reading Hebrew and "going-by-the-book." It was about family, friendship, and catching up.

The four other girls in this group of friends also were the only Jewish teens at each of their high schools and were not very involved in synagogue or Jewish life, either. I think that if they had been a bit more involved, I would have made the effort as well. However, we were all busy with clubs, sports, classes, and applying for college, and I think that they would agree with me that being Jewish was pushed to the back burner.

My experience as the only Jewish teen at my high school is a lesson for Jewish organizations. As one tries to get Jewish teens more involved in Jewish activities, try and integrate being Jewish into their communities and into their high schools. Although all of my friends embraced the fact that I was Jewish, it did not fill the void of actually participating in Jewish experiences. If there had been more Jewish students in my school or a place for Jewish teens to congregate in my community, I would have been more interested in Jewish life.