

On Being Queer and Jewish — and why neither should matter

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I never thought of my Jewishness as a political statement. Until now.

Honestly, I never thought much about my Jewishness at all. Until now.

I went to a private Hebrew school for two years as a kid, but that was mainly because my mother also taught there. I also went to some kind of weekend Hebrew school when I was very little, but my memories of that are entirely fuzzy. Arts and crafts were probably involved.

Since my bat mitzvah, I've probably been to synagogue fewer than five times. I can't remember the last time I celebrated the Sabbath of my own volition. I've missed Passover Seder the last couple years. I rarely thank God for things, or pray to him for others.

Religion, for me, is peripheral.

Religion, for me, just is.

It's a sense of community. It's with what my family identifies. It's a box I check on the occasional form.

I'm not invested in who my God is or how (s)he is different from yours. I'm not invested in rules and scriptures and commandments. My religion is pretty much to be a good person, to treat people with compassion and respect, and to act in ways that are honorable and will not make me regret my behavior the next day.

I don't see much difference between Jews and Christians and Buddhists. We all have our God(s) and we do our thing and we try to be good people, and at the end of the day, your God is as irrelevant to me as with whom you share your bedroom.

Because your sexuality, like your religion, is peripheral.

And yet, I remember when I was in my early twenties, living in New York, first realizing just how political a choice my sexuality actually was.

When I made my “queer” shirt, I was conscious of the statement it made. Let me clarify that. I was self-conscious of the statement it made. I was aware that, in the wrong context, it could get me into quite a lot of trouble, and I felt defiant wearing it precisely because of that. I felt very punk and confrontational. This was my sexuality and you were going to have to deal with it. You were going to know it because I was showing it to you. I was joining a demographic that came with its own specific baggage and identity, ironically much like Judaism.

Looking back on it, knowing that I would probably not wear a “queer” shirt now, knowing that revealing my sexuality to others, much less my students, is just as loaded a statement as ever, I also wonder at my reluctance to wear my Israel shirt. I feel the same sense of defiance wearing my Star of David necklace — and the same awareness that both could get me into quite a lot of trouble.

My religion has finally caught up with my sexuality. Both make me self-conscious but still defiant. Both are political choices. Neither should be.

Much as people are beaten up for being gay, people are being beaten up and ridiculed and hated for their Judaism. And somehow, because of this, I suddenly feel a connection to my Judaism that I have never felt before. That punk defiance of my twenties echoes in wearing my Star of David necklace while the anti-confrontational hesitation translates to my reluctance to wear my Israel shirt. It translates to my hesitation to declare my religious affiliation at times. I still do, don't get me wrong, but there is a moment when I think twice, when I realize that it could get me into trouble, and maybe I should just keep my mouth shut.

I've been lucky in some ways that I can “pass.” I don't look queer – and I don't look Jewish. I don't have a Jewish last name. I can easily avoid the kind of confrontation that for other people is unavoidable. When I had blonde hair, many people thought I was German or Swedish (and, of course, not Jewish).

I wonder about the orthodox Jews, the ones donning their dictated-by-religion uniforms, and if they feel the same sense of defiance mixed with trepidation that I felt donning my “queer” shirt. It's so easy to blend in (at least for some people), that it takes a certain amount of bravery not to do so. It is a courageous choice to defiantly proclaim your sexuality and your religion – when either could get you stigmatized or beaten or killed.

The most ludicrous part of it all, of course, is that both are peripheral. Why would I care with whom you sleep? Why would I care to whom you pray? And yet for some people (for many, many people) the answers to both those questions inspire rage and hate and homicide.

I wish I could go back to not thinking about my Judaism. I wish I could go back to not thinking about my sexuality. But that would be living a lie. That would be blending for the sake of safety and convenience. And that's not much of a life, is it?

