My Jewish Journey

How three Washington-area women arrived at their Jewish identities.

Le'ah Moy Lugassi wears a Star of David necklace and has a similar tattoo on her arm. She also has "Moy," her maiden name, tattooed on the back of her neck in Chinese.

Story and photographs by Jacqueline Hyman
Staff Writer

What makes up identity? Is it the experiences you've had, or the background you come from? Is it the way others perceive you, or is it a feeling that you define for yourself?

Three women from the Washington area shared their Jewish journeys with us, showing that how we define ourselves is constantly evolving.

Intersection of identities

Growing up in Norfolk, Kathryn Fink was part of a tight-knit Jewish community in an area without many Jews. Almost none of Fink's friends were Jewish.

"And so a big part of my Jewish identity has been feeling most Jewish when I'm around non-Jewish people," says Fink, 25. "Because I grew up in an area where I was a religious minority, I've always defined my Jewishness as something that sets me apart from others."

She's always answered a lot of questions about Judaism, even through college. But she says that can be "a talking point in a positive way."

From a young age, Fink, who grew up in a Conservative synagogue, identified with Judaism along what she calls "secular lines." It's possible, she says, to be a good Jew and not believe in God — something she says is a popular opinion among many millennial Jews she talks to.

"I would say believing in a higher power was never really the draw for me."

After her bat mitzvah, she didn't want to go to Hebrew school anymore. When she went to University of Virginia to study, she felt free to avoid the boring High Holiday services. But she began to miss the tradition and culture that helped shape her, so she attended a Hillel event.

With anti-Semitism on the rise, Kathryn Fink says she has been reflecting on the intersection of her identities as both a white woman and a Jewish woman.

"I think it wasn't until I was no longer forced to go to temple that I started to miss it. Again, not because I pray or I'm a devout person, but I missed that reminder of home and family that I realized I got."

Lately, she says, she has been reflecting on her identity a good deal — though being Jewish isn't usually the first way she describes herself.

"The thing about being Jewish is like, I might be a minority in some places. But when I walk around … externally, it's an invisible part of my identity. And so there's so much safety in that. And so I would never think for a second, like, I'm not benefiting from [my] whiteness."

With anti-Semitism on the rise, she says, white Jews may wonder where their place in activism is, "because there are other forms of bigotry that affect more marginalized people." She said bringing politics and Israel into discussions with other people makes things more complicated.

"I think in our current political climate, and just as I get older, I think way more about the intersection of my identity as being a white woman and as being a Jewish woman and way more, and how those mean different things. And the same thing."

She would like to connect with other Jews working for causes that are not necessarily related to Judaism. She still wants that Jewish connection.

"I often find myself trying to connect … the plight of others to what I know about my Jewish lineage, because … it fosters this really beautiful human connection around collective pain," Fink says. "And I think it's a really powerful part of contemporary Judaism."

The values and traditions of Judaism are engrained in Fink's identity, even if she doesn't hold deep religious beliefs.

"As I get more and more separation from those days of Sunday school that I didn't want to go to, I'm realizing more and more that it had a role in how I turned out. And so that's something that I would like to pass along, if I have a little me one day."

Having a Jewish soul

Le'ah Moy Lugassi, of Rockville, grew up in Chicago with a non-practicing Buddhist father and a grandmother who took her to church every so often. When she was 12, a confused Le'ah finally asked her dad, "What's my religion?" He replied, "Honey, it's whatever you want it to be."

Even before that, Moy Lugassi felt a connection to Judaism — her aunt's Jewish husband taught her and her siblings about some of the customs and beliefs.

"In my mind, I knew I believed in God, I knew that God is one, is the only all-knowing all-powerful, etc., etc. But I just didn't know where I fit in," Moy Lugassi, 35, says. "So I knew I had religion, I just didn't know what to call it."

When she was 17, she moved to Georgia to be with her mother, and took a world religions college course during which she was assigned to visit a religious establishment. She went to a Conservative synagogue called Congregation Beth Shalom, and immediately felt a connection.

"It was like, 'This is this is where I belong.' So it was very warming," she says. She starting bringing her son there for tot Shabbat services, and integrating into the community.

Moy Lugassi and her first husband had four weddings in one month. They started with a civil wedding, a Chinese tea ceremony and a Reform chuppah. But after she converted, they had a Conservative chuppah.

She originally wanted an Orthodox conversion because her highest priority was that Israel would recognize her and her children as Jews. She wants to make aliyah and calls Israel the "final destination."

But her search for the right fit was difficult. One rabbi told her that Judaism wasn't for her, because she wasn't born a Jew. She says she cried for two weeks after that.

Moy Lugassi has experienced a lot of outside criticism as well, especially being an Asian-American woman in the South. She says a woman

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Michaela Friedman has been rediscovering her Jewish identity apart from how she was raised in the Reform tradition.

once told her, "There ain't no such thing as a Chinese Jew."

"I had to defend myself — defend my right to be Chinese and to be American and to be Jewish," Moy Lugassi says. "I grew up in the North. So when I moved to the South, I didn't realize how different the outside of my face looks."

So, Moy Lugassi converted in 2008 through Beth Shalom, where she felt that connection to the community.

Moy Lugassi gets frustrated when people ask if she converted because her husband is a Jew. She says the conversion didn't change anything for her spiritually — because she always felt Jewish. It was a process she felt she had to go through for others to recognize her as a Jew.

"You get into the realization that, 'OK, I need validation, not just for myself, but from … everybody who's not me," she says.

Now, she says, she no longer feels that need. "Now I'm on the opposite side, because of everything that I've been through … I don't need a rabbi to tell me I'm Jewish."

Or, anyone else to validate that she's Chinese. While she keeps kosher and Shabbat, she still buys moon cakes for the Lunar Moon Festival and puts out candy on the Chinese New Year. But her primary identity is as a Jew. As she tells her children, "Judaism is our soul."

Moy Lugassi says her parents have been supportive. Her mother bought her a snow globe that plays "I Have a Little Dreidel." When she went through struggles with rabbis before her conversion, her dad listened and supported her.

She and her current husband, Naor, who is Israeli, moved to Rockville with Le'ah's three sons in August. Before they arrived, she emailed about 25 rabbis to try to get a sense where her family might find a comfortable home. She says a meeting with one rabbi moved her to "happy tears."

"That's how serious it is for me. Sometimes I tell my husband, 'You know what? I think it's just crazy. I have the weirdest relationship with God. I think God and I are too close to each other.'"

When she's questioned about her Jewish identity, Moy Lugassi stands up for herself — but she also says she no longer needs people to recognize her as a Jew, because her identity does not depend on what others think.

"I've come to the realization that my soul has always been Jewish," she says. "I've actually had a conversation with my rabbi that, yes, sometimes Jewish souls are placed non-Jewish bodies — sometimes to atone for something. And you know what? I'm OK with that, because I found my way back."

Reconnecting and evolving

With a family that ran a Jewish sleepaway camp, involvement at her Reform synagogue and in the BBYO youth group, Silver Spring native Michaela Friedman felt that Judaism was part of her everyday life — even though she went to an Episcopal high school.

"I think for me, what that forced me to do growing up is I made an effort to build in the Jewish community outside of my school, because [in school] that wasn't going to be as much of an option for me."

When Friedman, now 31, went to Clark University in Massachusetts, her involvement decreased. In the liberal arts school's small Jewish population, there were even fewer Reform Jews like her. Eventually she transferred to the University of Maryland, Baltimore.

"As someone who grew up Reform, I felt, not alienated, but things were unfamiliar," she says. She had fewer friends in her personal Jewish community, and says Judaism became a sort of afterthought in her life.

About a year ago, Friedman was going through a career transition, and was having a tough time defining herself. She said to herself, "I need to build who I am … outside of my parents, and outside of just career, because I need to be able to feel OK, no matter where I'm at."

She found that rediscovering her Jewish identity was an important way to do that — beyond just Reform traditions.

"I am more than just my career. And I'm more than this daughter who does whatever my parents do," Friedman says, "and I can do something that really felt good and have continued to try and build because [being Jewish] gives me that comfort that regardless of where I'm at."

Friedman worked as a mental health wellness specialist at Perlman Camp in 2018, and as her job was flexible, was able to take part in much of the Jewish learning at the camp. She also worked with three rabbinical students there — one Renewal, one Reform and one Conservative — and they all shared their experiences as they got to know one another.

"I found it to be a really significant experience, where I kind of realized there had been something missing in my life," Friedman says. "This part of my life had not been as present and how much it felt valuable, and how I connected with people I didn't [know going in]."

She found the camp's pluralistic setting very appealing. "[It] allowed all these different ways of worshiping and appreciating that like … Judaism to me has so many parts."

Finding open and welcoming spaces is important to Friedman, who is now getting involved with 20s and 30s Jewish groups in Washington.

"I purposely [sought to] find spaces where my identity and practice are not in question," she says.

Friedman says her idea of what "a God figure" looks like is something that can evolve, and she feels good about the fact that her Judaism is about being inclusive.

"[What] I really loved is that the questioning … is a big part of Judaism as a whole, and I don't have to know, like feel certain, about my relationship with a higher power to be someone who practices in our community." WJW

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