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## What does it mean to be Jewish?

The flickering menorah candles standing alone in a sea of Christmas lights, the crunch of matzah in silence during Passover while everyone was trading easter eggs, and the awkward smiles given when someone wished me a Merry Christmas. Going to a school where I was one of the few Jewish children, it was difficult to truly understand what it meant to be Jewish. That changed when life cracked open the door wider, and I realized Judaism wasn't something I inherited passively; it was something waiting for me to claim actively.

When the first Jewish person, Abraham, made a covenant with God, the Jewish people and their faith were created. Yet, from the very beginning, Jewish people have faced injustices and persecution. When Jewish descendants moved to Egypt, they were faced with oppression and cruel enslavement. At one point, the Pharaoh even ordered the death of all Hebrew male newborns. But through this cruelty, the Jews persevered and never forgot their beliefs and their faith. Through this hardship, God was able to speak to Moses, commissioning him to deliver his people to freedom. After Pharaoh's stubborn refusal to release the Jewish people, the Ten Plagues began, and with the last plague, they had their escape from Egypt. Nevertheless, Jewish oppression never concluded. When the First Temple was built, it was later destroyed by the Babylonians. Then the Second Temple was destroyed as well. But despite this, the Jewish people persevered and never stopped believing in themselves. This perseverance and determination to preserve their culture is the basis of what it means to be Jewish.

This same unbreakable perseverance, that refusal to abandon belief in God and Jewish identity amid centuries of oppression, resonated endlessly through history, reaching one of the most harrowing tests which was the Holocaust: where six million Jews were murdered. Yet the survivors and their descendants continued to affirm *Am Yisrael Chai*, showing that the Jewish people will continue to live and never abandon their beliefs and traditions. The stories of these brave Jews continued to live on through books and historical accounts that showed, despite being in hiding, many still practiced Jewish traditions like lighting Shabbat candles and celebrating Jewish holidays. This resilience exceeded mere survival; it shaped Jewish identity for generations to come, and helped people living in the 21st century to fight antisemitism. The display of antisemitic ideas stirs a deep indignation within me, reminiscent of the unwavering determination my ancestors exhibited during the hardships of the Holocaust, Exodus, and many others. That remembrance shows that being Jewish isn't something that I inherited, but it's something that I choose to fight for, defend, and love every day.

Today, being Jewish means honoring the memory of those who came before us by continuing to celebrate our traditions, pass down our stories, and create new meaning within our communities. Whether through beliefs, acts of kindness, or standing up for justice, Jewish identity is continually renewed by each person who chooses to embrace it. In this way, perseverance becomes not just a response to adversity but a connection that bridges the people of the past, present, and future. Through learning about Jewish history, I've learned that being Jewish isn't something that should be hidden, but something that should be embraced and continued to fight for.

Both of my parents immigrated to America due to the antisemitism they faced in their countries, and while there was certainly less antisemitism here, as time went on antisemitism started to grow to hazardous levels. In the wake of the harrowing events on October 7, 2023, when Hamas attacked Israel, there was a surge in antisemitism, but it did not stop with just antisemitism; it turned into widespread harassment, vandalism, and assaults across the nation. It has escalated to the point where police officers are stationed outside synagogues. Yet despite the new wave of antisemitism, the Jewish people continue to display their unwavering perseverance and dedication that carried us through exile, temples being destroyed, and the Holocaust. We light Shabbat candles, celebrate Jewish holidays, and forge bonds that strengthen our community, enabling others to join a community that stands strong. I remember a few years back, I joined a Jewish organization for the first time, and that was a time I truly felt the greatest sense of belonging and pride. Growing up in schools where there were few Jews, I struggled to connect with my Jewish culture. Without a community of like-minded individuals, I felt disconnected from my heritage. However, joining Jewish communities and organizations taught me that being Jewish is something to be proud of and embrace wholeheartedly. It reinforced my pride in my heritage and the rich traditions that come with it.

Being Jewish overpowers the feelings of awkwardness of not fitting in, but rather gives a sense of courage that inspires us to embrace our history, define our traditions, and stand proud even when faced with great adversity. Being Jewish isn't just telling people that you're Jewish; it's carrying the courage and perseverance of our ancestors who survived countless trials. It turns pain into resilience, fear into resolve, and Jewish history into motivation for people to be able to face hardships. No matter what challenges arise, the Jewish people will overcome them through perseverance, kindness, and standing up for injustices, and that is the meaning of being Jewish, and that unbreakable spirit is what makes us feel connected, strong, and truly proud.