

As a spiritual aid from Judaism I chose the Shabbat (Sabbath) as mine. The last time I was a practicing Jew who observed the Sabbath was 2009, so the experience was a little bittersweet for me.

The purpose of the Sabbath is two-fold, I believe. It is a time for reflection and prayer, when one turns one's focus from the outer world to the inner world and renews the intimate relationship one shares with G-d. The Sabbath affords people time to sit down and study the Tanakh.

I think it is also a time when a Jew strengthens the bonds of family and though this is a secondary consideration, it can have a remarkable effect on Jewish families. During the Sabbath you aren't supposed to use electricity, not even to turn on a light, so in our modern world where everyone is plugged in to some kind of technology and face to face interaction is increasingly rare, this is a time when Jews can reconnect with loved ones in a more significant way.

My mother no longer practices Judaism, but she decided to participate this week. She made challah bread earlier in the day and we prepared a large, festive meal as per custom. I began my Sabbath with the traditional lighting of the candles, the ritual hand washing, the saying of Kiddush over wine and bread, and sitting down to eat the meal. We really took our time eating and talking. There is something different about the Sabbath meal, it feels spiritual and weighted with the long history of those Jews who came before us. However, it also has a lightness and joy to it that I had almost forgotten.

The Sabbath was always a wonderful experience from my childhood and saying those prayers again was a familiar comfort, though it also made me sad that this is a ritual I don't practice anymore or have the same belief in. I did feel it was important to honor the dignity of the Sabbath just as I would have years ago and so I went through the ritual as I did as a conservative Jew.

The rest of the evening went along in the same spirit, mostly reading and relaxing at home. Saturday morning, I drove to a conservative synagogue in Pensacola, Florida called B'nai Israel. As I said, it's been close to a decade since I practiced, so no one really knew me or vice versa.

When I went to temple before, it was a much older crowd but this time there was more of a mixture of ages. Everyone was very welcoming and I explained that I had not been there since 2009. They caught me up on some of the things I had missed. The Rabbi I had known during my time had returned to Israel and there was a new exchange student from Israel. When I went before our exchange student was a young woman from a Kibbutz in Haifa and she died in a boating accident. This time, I met a young man, Zev, who was very friendly. These students lead Hebrew school on Saturdays.

After the service, we all sat down in a separate area to eat. There were traditional foods like gefilte and lox. I stuck to just a plain old bagel and cream cheese! This ritual on Saturday mornings was one of my favorite things about attending synagogue when I was younger. There were about thirty of us, sitting around at tables knitted closely together, eating and drinking coffee.

As I fondly recalled, there was a debate about politics. I actually looked forward to this. When I was a little girl, my Rabbi used to tease us that it wasn't a real Jewish gathering if there wasn't a heated discussion about something. I enjoyed this vigorous exchange because though everyone is very up front about beliefs, whether concerning politics or religion, there is always a mutual respect. This is a time to explore how we feel as a community about things going on in the world around us and how they touch on our values.

I returned home in mid afternoon and spent the rest of the day with my family. The Sabbath is a time for spiritual reflection and I did think about why I had left Judaism behind and whether it was a choice I was still comfortable with. I don't know that I'll ever believe again but it was nice to be a part of the community, if only for a few hours.