

Rabbi Jess Kerman

Personal Statement

When I was growing up, my sisters and I would often be the only Jews in the whole school. I was the first Jew many of my friends ever knew. I found myself playing the role of a translator, inviting others to understand what it means to live a Jewish life, and why it means so much to me. My journey of inviting people to encounter Judaism was deepened when my synagogue's student rabbi invited me to speak on an interfaith panel. I had also just taken an inspiring class on world religions, and I was captivated; each religion provided a new framework through which to view the world—a particular language a community uses to speak about the universal.

Language is the means by which we convey our traditions and values throughout time and space. And for the Jewish people, the language is Torah; not just the ink found on paper or animal hides, but the Torah we live. Learning and living Torah connects me to my past, present, and future— it is my heritage.

Explaining my Judaism and learning from others helped me learn more about myself and my heritage. Engaging honestly, openly, and collaboratively in this conversation required an evaluation and reaffirmation of my beliefs and values. Through holistic study and engagement, I confirmed that, indeed, Judaism is my core language: It is the sweetest on my tongue, the language most suitable to my palette. I came to know that I love being Jewish and that each segment of my life is uplifted and made whole when I add the language of Torah to it.

The experiences of sharing Jewish beliefs, ideas, and practices with others led me to pursue a path of learning to become a rabbi with the vision of my rabbinate as an opportunity for interfaith dialogue and inviting others to understand what it means to be Jewish.

Before beginning my studies at Hebrew Union College, I lived in Israel for a number of years. For the first time, nearly everyone in my day-to-day interactions was Jewish. I was exposed to the entire spectrum of Jewish practice, and for once, the authenticity of my Judaism was questioned by someone other than myself. Back home no one was around to tell me that my Judaism was not good enough. For the first time I doubted the way in which I engaged in my

Judaism. I lacked the confidence to feel authentic and authoritative in what I had previously taken for granted.

I spent the next three years in Israel joining a variety of different communities and programs where I met people from all kinds of backgrounds and approaches to being Jewish. An unfortunate common denominator amongst many of these communities is that there are always some people who will judge others for how they operate in the world, but there are even more people who will judge themselves. I know far too many people who are unfairly critical about how they engage in their Judaism; that they're a "bad jew". I might have fallen into the same mode of thinking if it weren't for my experience with a non-denominational program in Tzfat named *Livnot U'Lehibanot* ("To Build and to Be Built"). The facilitators of the program work hard at creating a safe space for exploration and inquiry. We cooked together in a kosher kitchen, we observed Shabbat in a traditional way, and we celebrated Simchat Torah, but we also volunteered, hiked, and sang—and all of these activities were framed as "Jewish".

These experiences helped me feel less ashamed, dejected, and ignorant. Instead of pointing out my lack of traditional observance, the program showed me ways of "adding more" but more importantly, it emphasized that anything can be framed as an authentic way of engaging in a Jewish life. I internalized a feeling of authenticity and being unapologetically Jewish.

As I continued to meet Jews who felt as if they don't speak their own language, that shared the same feelings of lacking authenticity as I had, I expanded my vision of my rabbinate: it would be dedicated to teaching Jews, too, what it means to be Jewish; Teaching them to speak the language, notice where Judaism already permeates their lives, and unapologetically delight in their heritage.

Today, we are living in a new normal. While the pandemic is over, we still feel its effects. On the one hand, I think many people are lonelier than ever. We all isolated for our safety and there's now a longing to be together. But on the other hand, people are burnt out, too tired to seek out those opportunities to be together. Long before Covid, I believed that the invite is one of the most important tools a rabbi can have to engage members, potential members, and their community at large. People just want to feel like they belong and are wanted, and nothing says "you are welcome here" like an invitation.

Lately, however, I've been holding on to the mantra that "an open invitation is no invitation." Many synagogues pride themselves on being a warm and welcoming community, but I would hazard to guess that all too often this is an open invitation. Believing that an open invitation is not enough, as a rabbi, I am committed to actively seeking out those who may find it challenging to step through the door, facilitating an inclusive and welcoming community where every individual feels not just invited but truly wanted.

As a rabbi, I aspire to be a part of a vibrant congregation where the warmth of belonging dispels the shadows of isolation, fostering a community that thrives on genuine connections and shared Jewish journeys. Through this, I hope to embody the essence of Judaism as a lived language, one that resonates with the diverse voices within our community and beyond, embracing the richness of our heritage and ensuring that everyone, from seasoned practitioners to newcomers, finds a place where they can unapologetically delight in their Jewish heritage.