

The Dilemma of the Jewish Divided Self

By Rabbi Evan Schultz

Should I outwardly identify myself as Jewish? This is a question that I, and many Jews living outside the land of Israel, are presented with each day. Should I tuck in my Jewish star? Should I wear a baseball cap over my yarmulke? Should I roll down my sleeves to cover up my Hebrew tattoo?

For most of my 44 years living in this country, I have lived with a split Jewish soul. I rarely wore anything upon my body that outwardly identified me as a Jew — even as I became a congregational rabbi. I rarely wear my yarmulke out in public, and I never wore a Jewish star around my neck.

This choice, to me, felt like its own embodiment of Jewish tradition. In his 1973 book, “The Mask Jews Wear,” Borowitz wrote that the 19th-century European Emancipation created an internal struggle for Jews: we became divided selves. “Society now taught the Jew that he was basically a citizen who might, in other areas of his life, be a Jew,” wrote Borowitz. “The freedom granted was extraordinary by previous Jewish experience. Yet the conditions under which it was given created a split in the Jewish soul.”

I too am a product of the 19th century European emancipation that Borowitz references. My Judaism to me was always more of a private piece of my life, that part of my divided self that I reserved more for the synagogue and rituals at home with my family. I felt that if I outwardly identified myself as Jewish, others would see me simply as “Jew,” and nothing more. An object, rather than a full human being. I would worry about making a mistake in public and anticipate others thinking, “look at that Jew doing this or that.” Such anxieties caused me to choose not to share my Jewishness publicly.

Something changed for me, however, since Oct. 7, and I think for many American Jews I know. I no longer wanted to live as a divided self. I no longer wanted to be Jewish only in private and in the walls of my synagogue, and I no longer wished to walk upon fragile tiles every time I stepped out in public, worrying about what others might think.

So for the first time in my life, shortly after Oct. 7, I started wearing a Star of David around my neck. Perhaps it was the local business owner who the other day referred to “your people in the war” that prompted me to realize that the divided self probably never really worked to begin with. Perhaps it was the fact that I found one that also incorporated the symbol of my favorite band, Phish, thus furthering a more whole self rather than a divided one.

I realize that my dilemma is somewhat unique to Jews, and it is a privilege to even have the choice to cover up one’s Judaism in public. I write this with full awareness and

understanding that certain religious, ethnic, and racial groups do not have the choice of whether or not to cover up or hide aspects of their identity.

I again want to reiterate that I realize there are certain groups, ethnicities, races, and religious groups where this is not a choice. I write this as a reality of my own experience as a white, Ashkenazi Jew living in America. I also know that there are real safety concerns these days about outwardly presenting oneself as Jewish, and we each must decide when it is safe for us to do so.

At the same time I have learned we can't ever fully hide from who we are, no matter what our background, our faith, or our identity. We have witnessed in recent months Israelis and Jews killed, kidnapped, harassed, shouted at, and discriminated against simply because they are Jewish, whether they wear a kippah or star of David or not. So today I start living as one whole self. And I pray others will love me for who I am, just as I love them for who they are.