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LIFE & ARTS | IDEAS | ESSAY

Religion for Adults Means Embracing Complexity

If you think you've outgrown your childhood faith, you might just need to discover the real depth of its teachings



ILLUSTRATION: ANDREA MONGIA

By Sarah Hurwitz

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In a couple of days, I'll be joining millions of other Jews world-wide in celebrating Rosh Hashana, the Jewish new year. As a child, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur—both of which involved dull, largely incomprehensible synagogue services—were two of my main points of contact with Judaism. And each fall, as I sat in a synagogue and mouthed prayers that insisted God is all-knowing and all-powerful and will surely reward or punish us for our good deeds or sins, I could almost taste the disdain on my lips.

Did the hundreds of people around me reciting these lines really believe this? Hadn't they noticed things like child abuse, famine and the Holocaust? Did they ever wonder why this deity who was so powerful was also so needy, demanding our endless prayers to "Him"?

Despite my doubts, I went through with my bat mitzvah. But it would be another



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I was 36 years old, working my dream job as head speechwriter for first lady Michelle Obama, when I went through a romantic breakup. It was tough, but by no means an existential crisis. I wasn't looking to fill a gaping hole in my life or take some epic spiritual journey.

Rather, during yet another solitary night in my apartment, I happened to receive an email newsletter from the local Jewish Community Center advertising an introduction to Judaism class. Eager for company and distraction, I signed up, figuring that it couldn't hurt to learn something about Jewish history and culture. I could just tune out the nonsense from my childhood.

But what I discovered in that class—and in the many books, classes and conversations that followed—was anything but childish.

Seen through adult eyes, the prayers revealed layers of unexpected meaning.

Those prayers that I had haughtily dismissed as a teenager? Seen through adult eyes, they revealed layers of unexpected meaning. A prayer said on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, for example, informs us that during these holidays, God decides “who will live and

who will die,” as well as “who will be calm and who will be tormented...who will be rich and who will be poor,” and so on.

I had always understood this prayer as promoting the kind of reward-and-punishment theology that I roundly reject. But then I learned that it quotes repeatedly from the Book of Job, in which God punishes a wholly innocent man and when confronted essentially responds, “You don't know what it's like to be me, so give me a break.” I now read this prayer as a theological subtweet hurled through time, as if some subversive liturgist was admitting, “We actually have no idea why bad things happen to good people. Maybe things don't happen for a reason. Maybe sometimes life is just really unfair.”

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What is your relationship with religion today? Has it changed over time? Join the conversation below.

And Job is just the beginning of Judaism's embrace of theological complexity. In my studies, I encountered a wildly diverse array of Jewish God concepts. God isn't a being in the sky, but rather God is everything, and we're all interconnected. God is the force that

makes for self-actualization, the process by which we become our highest, truest selves. God is what arises between two people in moments of profound relationship, when each encounters the other in their fullest humanity.



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begin to teach such things to children. And therein lies the problem: Many of Judaism's most profound teachings are accessible only to thoughtful adults. And this challenge isn't just limited to Judaism.

In his book "Zealot," about the life of Jesus, Reza Azlan writes about his brief embrace of Christianity as a child, followed by his disenchantment in his late teens. It wasn't until he studied Christianity as an adult that he "became aware of a more meaningful truth in the text" and found himself drawn to "the Jewish peasant and revolutionary who challenged the rule of the most powerful empire the world has ever known."

A Muslim friend of mine noted, "As an adult, as you engage the religious text and form a religious practice, you see all the gray...because you are engaging it for yourself and being critical and questioning."

Mature forms of religion don't traffic in simplistic or implausible answers, but push us to ask the right questions.

Another friend who, as a child, was a devout Hindu, found that by the time he went to college, much of Hinduism no longer spoke to him. Yet, he recalls, "I retained some elements of practice (meditation and some prayers) and retained a belief and faith in God that became deeper and more uniquely my own with time."

For some of us, the transition to adult religion is less gradual, brought on by a sudden life crisis. We followed all the rules but still suffered some unimaginable loss, and the old bromides about God having a plan and not giving us more than we can handle feel woefully inadequate to explain our new reality. So we're forced to wrestle with our old certainties, and if we're lucky, we come out the other side humbler and more nuanced in our faith.

But what about those of us who never grow up religiously? I'm not just talking about those who continue to worship a deity of human proportions—one who shares our prejudices and opinions on political issues—rather than an infinite and unfathomable Divine. I'm talking about people like me, who ditched our childhood



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abandoning our traditions to those who would distort them for their own small purposes and absolving ourselves of responsibility for the results.

We would never do such a thing in a secular context. If someone told us that they found their sixth-grade science or history classes to be dull and overly simplistic, and thus entirely stopped learning about those subjects, we would be appalled. But that is precisely what many of us do with religion, including plenty who continue to show up at our places of worship and go through the motions. We've rejected the kiddie stuff but never bothered to replace it with an adult version.

And that's a real loss, because mature forms of religion don't traffic in simplistic or implausible answers, but push us to ask the right questions. Not just "what does it mean to be happy or successful?" But "what does it mean to lead a truly ethical life? To be part of a community? To serve something greater than one's self?"

To find this kind of religion, we need to seek out—and if necessary, create—communities that embrace wise, loving versions of our faiths. We need to find clergy whose spiritual depth is matched by intellectual depth; who understand that faith at its best is a form of protest against the self-absorption, materialism, triviality and cruelty of modern life; and who are comfortable uttering the phrase "I don't know."

In short, when it comes to religion, many of us still need to grow up, and that means doing the seeking, learning and grappling required to make these traditions our own.

—Ms. Hurwitz is the author of *Here All Along: Finding Meaning, Spirituality and a Deeper Connection to Life—in Judaism (After Finally Choosing to Look There)*, published this month by Spiegel & Grau.

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