

Kol Nidre 5776
September 22, 2015

“Did it change you?” That is the question writer Abigail Pogrebin says she is most often asked about her year. Pogrebin spent 5775 observing every Jewish feast and fast, and wrote about it in *The Forward*, in a series entitled, “18 Holidays. One Wondering Jew.” To some strictly observant Jews, her effort may seem like no big deal; in fact, she just did what standard Judaism requires. But that is just the point. Most Jews -- I don't really have to explain this -- are pretty limited in the aspects of Judaism they know about or are exposed to. What Pogrebin does is to write about each holiday as a Jew of limited observance experiences them. And in that she has done something very exciting. If the rabbi says, for example, “Observe Sh'mini Atzeret,” most Jews will tune it out, but if a layperson writes about trying to take these days seriously, it is hard not to stand up and take notice.

I want to share with you a couple of things I think we can learn from Pogrebin's experience, in which she immersed herself in each holiday by interviewing rabbis and attending services spread throughout

the Jewish religious streams. The first is: be open to new Jewish experiences. That is one of the powerful points of the whole series. American Judaism has a tendency towards pigeonholing. This is evidenced in an experience I once had doing a funeral in a heavily Jewish area of New Jersey. When I told the funeral director I wanted to do seven stops as is the tradition while bringing the casket to the grave, he pushed aside my challenge to his expectations with, "But rabbi, he wasn't religious!" Pogrebin opens herself to the possibility of being moved by things she would not normally do. What can I learn from keeping the fast of the tenth of Tevet? Though she comes from liberal feminist stock, she samples davenning in synagogues with a mechitzah dividing the men from the women. And she writes movingly about what she has learned. She says how she has a new appreciation of the link between Passover and Shavuot, freedom and responsibility. She tells of the link between Chanukah and a family member's time of illness: Sometimes light can come when you expect no more light, when you think all hope of light has been extinguished. The fast of the tenth of

Tevet -- commemorating the start of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem -- impresses upon her the importance of recognizing anti-Semitic rumblings early, of how Jews can reanimate ancient tragedies to speak to modern ones, and of the transformation of a minor fast day into a major call to ameliorate suffering. Indeed, Pogrebin is impressed by the focus on the disadvantaged connected to almost every special day on our calendar.

In addition to openness to more Jewish experiences, another takeaway from *18 Holidays* is honesty with yourself. Pogrebin does not shy away from saying when things “didn’t do it” for her. On Yom Kippur, a holiday I think she has always kept in some fashion, she writes of how the breast-beating did not open her heart more, and of how the constant repetition of liturgy didn’t move her particularly, even though she knows in theory, “there is power in repetition.” She appeals for some of the power of ancient Temple ritual: “Bring back the goat,” she suggests. Pogrebin complains about the separate seating on Hoshanah Rabbah, the last day of Sukkot, where at the Carlebach synagogue the

men seemed to be having a much more fervent experience -- although a later Orthodox synagogue was a positive moment. And in her recent summary of her year's experience, she speaks of how she truly gets the point of many practices she never understood before, she also "still doesn't get the point of many rituals" and does not think she will be quick to fast six times again. Jews -- perhaps the most observant, in particular -- are sometimes reluctant to admit -- even to themselves -- when some piece of Jewish practice is just not our favorite. There is nothing offensive or sacrilegious about being ambivalent about some aspect of Judaism or not being moved by an experience you think is supposed to move you. But I will save the discussion of whether you should do those things anyway for another time.

My last point is that what Abby Pogrebin does here takes effort. She makes a commitment to observing six fast days, most of which had not previously been in her experience. She takes time to prepare for each holiday by learning from numerous rabbis, and carves out time to go to synagogue and to events like a tikkun leyl shavuot, an all-night

Shavuot study session. To observe Judaism with any degree of fullness, there has to be some sacrifice and commitment. In this regard I think of a very famous sociological study Marshall Sklare did in the 1950's. He found that Jews in America tended to engage in Jewish practices that did not separate them unduly from their neighbors, were limited to a few days a year, and could be centered around the children. Jonathan Sarna points out that these findings are still widely accepted. But it is not enough. The way the majority of Jews in America naturally tend to practice their Judaism is not enough. This is a little disturbing, because it means we have to fight against the sociological tide. Judaism requires sacrifice. It means behaving differently from our neighbors more than once or twice a year, it requires adult engagement, not just for the sake of the children. Sometimes it requires insisting to your employer that you will be off on certain days, or getting the professor to give you the exam on another day. I sympathize with the difficulty of taking off from school or work on Jewish holidays, more so as I get older and see the pressures of our society -- but a meaningful life always involves choices.

The problematic way American Jews think about this is a pattern of many years. Sandy Koufax took off *one day* during a very important baseball game, and he has been regarded as a huge hero to the American Jewish community ever after. Not to say I don't admire what he did, but our awe of it is something to reflect on. Our way of thinking has to change, if we really want to preserve a vibrant Judaism.

Abigail Pogrebin's experience can serve as a model. Suppose each of us makes a commitment this year to observe a holiday we have never observed before, or to try to do something to mark each holiday, including perhaps half an hour or an hour of learning about it. The internet makes that simple. We have an opportunity coming up. In five days it will be Sukkot. One thing that Pogrebin says is that she regrets how often previously Sukkot did not really appear on her radar screen.

It hits me like a ton of grapes: I was sukkah-deprived. This may require some serious Jewish therapy because I can't get those sukkahless autumns back.

I mourn not just my own childhood but those of my children. Just

think of the sweet sukkah memories I could have created when they were small! How they'd have relished a family construction project each fall, eating every meal outside — a permanent picnic. How delighted would they have been to roll out sleeping bags under the stars?

She writes that she can't imagine sidelining Sukkot again any time soon. So I invite you, whatever you have done for Sukkot in the past, to do more this year. If you have never really paid it attention, resolve to be in a Sukkah at least once this year. You could come to our Pizza in the Hut event next Thursday, or the Sukkah hop next Sunday. If you build a Sukkah at your home, try to bensch Lulav and Etrog every day, except Shabbat. You get the idea. And we should take this spirit into every holiday with us: "How can I do a little more?"

To the question she is constantly asked, "Did it change you?" Abby Pogrebin answers, "yes and no." The "no" doesn't bother me that much. I would not have expected that she would suddenly become a strictly observant Jew. But her new and more sophisticated knowledge

about Jewish holy days -- and therefore about Judaism in general -- has gained her a new perspective. She has grown in discovering that there is much more to Judaism than she learned in Hebrew school. May all of us participate in some way in her journey. Let each of us pledge to widen our horizons in 5776, to root ourselves more deeply in the Jewish calendar. We have a sacred duty to try and rediscover the wisdom and beauty of the Jewish way of life. Let us recognize that Judaism requires sacrifice, giving more than we may be inclined. May recommitting to our holy days help us bring renewal to our people and even the world, as Isaiah taught:

וְהָיָה מִדִּי־חֲדָשׁ בְּחֲדָשׁוֹ וּמִדֵּי שַׁבָּת בְּשַׁבְּתוֹ יָבֹא כָּל־בָּשָׂר לְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֹת לִפְנֵי אֲמֵר יְהוָה

And new moon after new moon,
 And sabbath after sabbath,
 All flesh shall come to worship Me

—said the LORD.¹

¹ Jewish Publication Society. (1985). *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Is 66:23). Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

