

Is Being a Little Jewish Like Being a Little Pregnant?

I am a Jewish chaplain – the first Jewish chaplain at Sequoia Hospital. I have a masters in theology from USF, a Jesuit institution – the first Jew to receive this USF degree. I have long held an interest in both the Jewish and Christian traditions. And I began my interfaith career as an interfaith counselor for couples who did not feel safe speaking to a rabbi (a little too Jewish) or a priest (a little too Christian). That is where I came in, a little of both was just right. My main goal for these couples was to create a space where each person in the relationship felt heard – a sacred space. As a chaplain, that is the same space that I create for my patients in the hospital.

Jewish hospital patients are often underserved by chaplaincy and most do not even know that there is such a thing as a Jewish chaplain. When I introduce myself as the hospital chaplain, the most frequent response I hear from Jewish patients is, “Oh, no thank you. We are Jewish, so no need for a chaplain.” They think that the chaplain must be a minister or priest. There is so much pleasure in answering, “I’m a Jewish chaplain.” Their next question usually is, “Are you a rabbi?” Then we share a little about ourselves and our Judaism. Jewish patients often confide, “What would we do with a Catholic (or substitute any religion not their own) chaplain?” Many Jewish patients are concerned that they not appear rude or different by chasing the chaplain away, but that does not make them comfortable confiding with non-Jewish chaplains on the spiritual and emotional issues they confront as patients. They have shared with me that they are looking for Jewish spiritual support and comfort, but are unaware that this exists for

them. They are looking for a sacred connection in order to organically form a spiritual bond.

The quest for the spiritual is not unfamiliar to Jews. In fact, Thomas Cahill, in his book, *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels*, wrote that the Jews invented the concept of the spiritual. “There was no way of exaggerating how strange a thought this was...The word that falls so easily from our lips – *spiritual* – had no ready counterpart in the ancient world.” That is, until the bible, where the roots of the three Abrahamic traditions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – are found. While Judaism is infused with a sense of the spiritual, many Jews have little connection to that tradition, but define themselves as only culturally Jewish. Yet whether religious or cultural, Jewish identity is at the heart of many Jewish lives.

My parents, now in their eighties, live in a retirement community in Palm Desert, California with many Jewish neighbors. My parents and their Jewish friends (their *hevrah*) confirm what I know and feel as a Jewish chaplain: Jewish patients want and need Jewish support and comfort, and they need to know that these services are available to them. Yet the presence of a Jewish chaplain, sharing Jewish wisdom and prayers with the medical community and its Jewish patients, is an often unmet need.

This is true for several reasons. Jewish hospital patients often do not request a chaplain because they simply can not conceive of a Jewish chaplain. In addition, I am always surprised at the significant number of unaffiliated Jews I meet in the hospital, particularly among the elderly. The cost of

synagogue membership, driving and health restrictions that limit synagogue attendance, and the fact that most people join a synagogue when they have young children all result in a lower rate of affiliation among the elderly and, therefore, fewer services and less support that comes from a synagogue community. And while synagogue rabbis (or fellow members) may visit their own congregants in the hospital, most simply do not have the time to visit unaffiliated Jewish patients.

I am deeply saddened by the number of Jewish patients who do not list themselves as Jewish when admitted to the hospital. I actively search out these patients. I can often tell if they are Jewish, either by last name or after spending some time with them and their families. As chaplains, we ask patients what faith they are. A common answer from a Jewish patient is “none” or “I am not really religious.” What does it mean to be “not really religious?” Not many Christians describe themselves this way. After I share that I am a Jewish chaplain, a patient may confide that they are Jewish, but quickly indicate that they are not connected with a synagogue.

The majority of my patients are not Jewish, but fall under the large Christian umbrella. Jews share quite a lot with our Christian brothers and sisters and I have heard only kind words when Christian patients and family members find out that I am a Jewish chaplain. They often grab my hand and tell me who is Jewish in their family, among their grandparents, or they talk about their best friend who is Jewish. Their sharing is endearing and it means a lot to them. It makes me happy to see how proud they are to share this information with me. It seems that the whole world is a little Jewish. Can someone be a little Jewish? You either are or you are not. Some share that

they are culturally Jewish because they eat bagels and lox. Are you culturally Christian if you drink egg nog and eat fruit cake at Christmas?

There is a real need for Jewish chaplains. I write this with pride in our profession, although a bit hesitant for fear of hurting the feelings of my non-Jewish colleagues who have prepared themselves to serve in a society of great religious and cultural diversity. I have great respect for other traditions and a strong commitment and desire to learn from others. As do my colleagues. I greatly appreciate the shared values of Judaism and Christianity and respect the differences that serve to define our distinct traditions. As do they. I have learned to draw deeply both from our shared values and from distinctly Jewish traditions in my work as a chaplain and this approach has been embraced by my colleagues.

There is real need for Jewish chaplains who are able to work with diverse individuals, families, groups, institutions, and communities -- both Jewish and non-Jewish. As a Jewish chaplain, I seek to deepen both my chaplaincy skills and my knowledge of the Jewish tradition in order to work in multi-dimensional chaplaincy settings, sharing a Jewish tradition that places service to the sick among its highest values.